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VOLUME I.

XX-11-13

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G. E. LESSING.

LESSING.

BY

JAMES SIME.

"Vormals, im Leben, ehrten wir dich als einen der Götter,
Nun, da du todt bist, herrscht über die Geister dein Geist."

GOETHE.

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IN TWO VOLUMES.

WITH PORTRAITS.

VOL. I.

XX p 13

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1877.

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(1729- 1781)

TO

J. A. S.

PREFACE.

EVERY educated Englishman is supposed to know something of Goethe and Schiller; but probably few have anything like an adequate idea of the character and labours of Lessing. Yet Goethe and Schiller built upon the foundations he had laid, and no German ever lived whose career is more thoroughly worthy of study. He was a man of singularly noble and attractive nature, and cast abroad more germs of fruitful thought than any other writer of his time. In him we find the ideal of the best qualities of the eighteenth century, and some of those considered most characteristic of the epoch in which we ourselves live.

"In all literary history," says Heine, "Lessing is the writer whom I love most;" and very many Germans would willingly adopt this language as their own. He still lives in the memory of his people, who know well how much they owe him, recall with pride his great achievements, and welcome the smallest fragment that is from time to time added to his published writings. Goethe him-

self hardly exercises a stronger intellectual and moral influence.

He has formed the subject of many biographies and biographic sketches. Of these, the first was by his brother, Karl Lessing. This work did not satisfy Lessing's friends, and the theme was undoubtedly beyond the writer's powers. It is now, however, the highest authority for biographical details, and its style is, as a rule, clear and animated.

In 1850 appeared the first volume of what was intended to be a very elaborate biography by T. W. Danzel. The arrangement of his materials is sometimes very confused, but no student of Lessing deserves warmer praise. He brought to his task culture and insight, devoted himself to it with enthusiasm, and shrank from no toil that enabled him to do justice to his subject. Unfortunately he died before his work was half done. G. E. Guhrauer, who was already known as the author of a treatise on Lessing's "Education of the Human Race," undertook to complete it; and he did so with learning, tact, and judgment.

The only other biography which need be mentioned is that of Adolf Stahr. It contains little that may not be found in the work of Danzel and Guhrauer, and as a critic the author could not compare with either of these writers; but he was master of a vigorous and popular style, and on the whole Germany seems not dissatisfied with his representation of the earliest of its genuinely classical authors. A translation of the book, by E. P. Evans, has been published in America.

From all the writers now named, as well as from others

mentioned in the proper places, I have obtained help in forming a conception of Lessing's personality and work. In the first instance, however, I have always sought to derive my impressions from his own writings. My aim has been to convey a living idea of the man himself, using for this purpose as often as possible his own words; to set forth the results of his labours; and to offer some suggestions as to their worth. He went over so wide a range that it is by no means easy to follow him; but even the attempt to do so is usually well rewarded.

Several volumes casting light upon the circumstances of Lessing's life, published since the German biographies were originally written, I have been able to use. These are "Zur Erinnerung an Gotthold Ephraim Lessing" (1870), a volume containing numerous letters and other papers, preserved in the Wolfenbüttel Library, where Lessing was for eleven years librarian; "Briefwechsel zwischen Lessing und seiner Frau," a new and important edition of the letters which passed between Lessing and the lady who became his wife, by A. Schöne (1870); and "Lessing, Wieland, Heinse, nach den handschriftlichen Quellen in Gleims Nachlasse dargestellt," by H. Pröhle (1877). The first of these volumes is edited by Dr. O. von Heinemann, the present occupant of Lessing's post. I am indebted to him for several hints communicated during a pleasant hour I spent with him under the shadow of the Wolfenbüttel Library, in the room in which Lessing did all the best work of his last years.

Several good portraits of Lessing exist. That of which a photograph has been obtained for the present work, and

which has genuine merit as a picture, was considered by his contemporaries the most successful. It was included among the portraits of Gleim's "Temple of Friendship" in Halberstadt, and is now in the Gleïm Stiftung in that town. The work has been attributed to G. Oswald May, but the artist is not certainly known. Its precise date cannot be determined; we can only say that it was painted before 1771—that is, before Lessing's forty-second year. Goethé was so struck by it during a visit to Halberstadt that he begged to be allowed to take it away for some time. He long kept it beside him, and at last parted with it very unwillingly.

Eva Lessing's portrait is from an etching by Professor Bürkner, prefixed to Schöne's edition of the "Briefwechsel zwischen Lessing und seiner Frau." The painting from which it is taken was sent to Lessing from Vienna in 1770 by the lady herself, and ever afterwards hung in his study. It is in the possession of the family descended from his stepdaughter.

There are now a good many collected editions of his writings. The first of high importance, begun in 1838, was that of Lachmann, who applied to the undertaking the skill which had made him illustrious as an editor of the ancient classics. I have used the edition of Maltzahn (1853–57), in twelve volumes. He adopted Lachmann's text, but had at his disposal some fresh materials. The edition which Hempel, of Berlin, has been issuing during the last few years in his "Wohlfeile Classiker-Ausgaben," is of great value. Each class of Lessing's works has been entrusted to a special editor; various fragments and letters

have been published for the first time; and there are careful notes and introductions.

Of the editions of separate works it is necessary to allude only to "Lessing's Laokoon, herausgegeben und erläutert," by Hugo Blümner (1876). I do not know any more admirable reprint of a modern classic. The text is based on that of the original edition, and the notes, which I have found of great service, are learned and suggestive.

In my study of the period of which a rapid sketch is given in the introductory chapter, and to which there are necessarily many references throughout the work, I have been much indebted to Biedermann's "Deutschland im achtzehnten Jahrhundert:" a book of great research, and excellently written. It includes a very good study of Lessing. The literary aspects of the same period are powerfully treated in Hettner's "Literaturgeschichte des achtzehnten Jahrhunderts."

JAMES SIME.

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LESSING.

CHAPTER I.

INTRODUCTORY.

ALTHOUGH Lessing's work is of enduring value, it is impossible fully to understand it without reference to the circumstances amid which it was produced. He was not one of those writers who separate themselves as much as possible from their time; his activity was almost wholly determined by the needs of his age. It will be well, therefore, before occupying ourselves with the record of his life, to glance at the state of Germany when he began his literary career.

He did so almost exactly in the middle of the eighteenth century, and the nation was then passing through one of those transition periods in which two epochs come into conflict. For the origin of the epoch which was slowly dying, we must go back to the close of the Thirty Years' War. No war ever left on the history of a people a deeper mark than that fearful struggle left on the history of Germany. It would be going too far to say that it resulted in no benefit whatever, for it at least placed on a level in the greater part of the country the three faiths—Catholicism, Lutheranism, and Calvinism. After the Peace of Westphalia (1648), a man could no longer be hounded from one State to another because he held by one or other of these

creeds. This was, no doubt, a gain of unspeakable importance, but it was one which would ultimately have been reached through peaceful progress; and in all other respects the war was an unmitigated curse. Its most obvious result was that the princes were able to grasp every right they had ever dreamed of winning. Their votes at the Diet were made decisive, not merely deliberative; and within their territories they shook off all save the name of allegiance to the Emperor. Thus was Germany, like a second Prometheus, bound to the rock, and not one vulture, but hundreds, preyed on its vitals.

It is hardly possible to form too low an estimate of the class which thus subjected to itself a great people. Louis XIV. robbed Germany of some of its fairest lands and cities, and lost no opportunity of wounding its honour; but the princes could rarely be moved to resent his outrages. Many of them were his very humble servants, and greedily caught the bribes he contemptuously flung them. At home they applied their authority to the basest uses. There were, of course, exceptions; as, for instance, the Great Elector, a ruler of whom any state might be proud, and by whose wise administration Prussia even now profits. The majority, however, had but one aim: to minister to their vanity and pleasure at the expense of their subjects. The Diets, which were once a check upon their extravagance, were either abolished or did not venture to do more than register the decrees of their lords. Before the war, the princes, while invested with high authority, were not wholly severed from the people; they were Germans in ideas, sympathies, occupations, and amusements. After it, they almost ceased to be Germans, their highest ambition being to pass for Frenchmen. They adopted French as the language of their courts; what books they read were almost wholly French; they had French tutors and governesses for their children, were waited upon by French servants, and dressed in the French style. And they strove hard to comport themselves like the French King. "L'état, c'est

moi," was a motto that exactly suited their fancy. The grandeur that was not inappropriate in Paris might seem scarce adapted to the capital of a territory perhaps a few miles in circumference, but the owners of such capitals did not see their position in this light. They, too, would surround themselves by a halo of semi-divine majesty; and they trod their tiny stage with the step of beings who honour the planet by dwelling on it. That their armies, and palaces, and banquets, and hosts of retainers meant the cries and tears of suffering multitudes, in no way diminished their enjoyment. The suffering multitudes existed for their princes; and it was their function not only to toil for their betters, but to feel grateful that they were permitted so great a privilege.

The nobles naturally caught the tone of the princely class. Few of them now lived in the country. Their estates had mostly been ruined by the war, and almost all of them sought to mend their broken fortunes by paying court to the various sovereigns. They also became servile imitators of the French, and did their best to encourage the princes in evil courses. After all, they made but sorry Frenchmen. To be able to consume a larger quantity of wine than any one else, was the highest attainment large numbers of them could conceive. They would challenge each other to drinking tournaments, and the best man was he who could attack a fresh bottle while his rivals lay almost dead at his feet. To say that there was not a very lofty ideal of morality among German nobles at this miserable period is vastly to understate the facts; their moral degradation was almost incredible. Many of them, to gain money or office, would openly sell the honour of their wives and daughters, and there was often active competition among them in this kind of traffic.[1]

If we turn from princes and nobles to the people, there is little during the whole period that followed the Thirty

1 Biedermann's Deutschland im achtzehnten Jahrhundert, ii. p. 123.

Years' War on which the eye can rest with pleasure, for the spirit of the nation was utterly broken. Before the war, the population may have been about seventeen millions; after it, the number cannot have exceeded four or five millions. What a world of sorrowful meaning lies behind this single fact! What agony, what humiliation, what despair! Even in our era of war and bloodshed, we can hardly present to ourselves a true picture of the terrible scenes with which, for a generation, Germany was familiar. The bands that slew each other in the name of God were not disciplined armies, always more or less controlled by enlightened public opinion; they were chiefly made up of needy adventurers, who sold their swords to the highest bidder, and whose only purpose was to find or make opportunities of savage plunder. Women suffering the pangs of childbirth they would, with blows and brutal jests, compel to rise and reveal where treasure was hid. They burned, and robbed, and killed, until cruelty became a delight for its own sake; and every barbarous and wanton device was adopted in order to add to the bitterness and degradation of husbands, fathers, and brothers. So desperate was the want which sometimes prevailed, that famished parents devoured their own children, and then killed themselves from horror at their deed. Bands of starving wretches would hunt down men as if they were wild beasts, and occasionally a group would be caught around a fire partaking of the frightful meal thus obtained. We do not need written records to tell us the results of a war like this, carried on so long that a child at its beginning was a man of middle life at its close. Industry and trade were almost wholly destroyed, and the people were demoralised to an extent without parallel in modern history. Schools and churches had been closed in vast numbers, so that a generation had grown up not only amid violence and suffering, but without those refining influences which might have kept alive the ideal of

a happier lot. The free imperial cities, in which an active population had for centuries exercised the rights of citizens, and surrounded themselves by many evidences of culture, either lost their independence or stiffened into oligarchies. The subjects of the princes, far from detesting the chains in which they were bound, feebly accepted them as inevitable, and even seemed to find melody in their clanking. A more melancholy spectacle Europe had not seen since the far-off time when the magnificent fabric of the Western Empire was shattered by the blows of barbaric hordes. A nation full of exuberant life had fallen from its high estate, its energies sapped, its memories blurred and confused; and it scarce ventured to lighten the burden of its miserable present by the hope of a better future.

The Churches had an unequalled opportunity of proving their Divine mission, but they wholly missed it. The Catholic reaction which swept Germany into war may have moved towards mean issues by mean paths, but it was at least a reality; its promoters were in thorough earnest. The fire even of their zeal had been quenched in blood, and the action of the Church became a mere dull routine. Long before the Thirty Years' War, the religious life of the Reformation had been all but lost in bitter controversies between Lutheranism and Calvinism, and now there was little to remind Germany that the Reformation had ever meant anything more than the quarrels of dogmatists. A spasmodic effort was sometimes made to reconcile the contending Protestant camps, but these attempts usually increased in the end the intensity of theological spite. On rare occasions a solitary voice would be raised to protest against the open defiance of every moral law by the princes; but, as a rule, the priests of all creeds were only too ready to find excuses for the crimes and vices of men who had lucrative posts at their disposal. One movement—Pietism—under the guidance of the energetic and high-minded Spener (1633–1705), did.

give signs of vitality; and for a time it made rapid progress in the leading cities, arousing a question, even in the minds of some members of the ruling classes, whether, after all, life may not have serious meaning. But Pietism divorced religious feeling from culture, and it was soon degraded into a dismal faith, whose object was to rob existence of every element of charm and zest.

The universities fell as far below their true level as the Churches. In the days of the Renascence a breath of spring had passed into them from Italy, and it seemed not improbable that a race of scholars would arise for whom learning would have fascinations apart from its bearing on this question or on that. Unluckily, the Renascence in Germany was represented mainly by theologians, and scholarship is a plant of too complex and tender growth to flourish in the stormy atmosphere of religious strife. After the Thirty Years' War the very memory of a pure devotion to classical literature had died out. Professors were appointed for no particular merit but because they had influence at headquarters; and they delivered what were called their lectures in a sort of barbarous Latin, which few of their students understood. Sometimes, for the sake of a higher salary, they would be moved from one faculty to another, and then they had to teach a subject while learning its elements. The students engaged in every pursuit open to them except study. Their years at the university were usually years of wild riot, the records of the various university towns being filled with complaints of their rudeness. The very existence of universities was to some extent a witness in favour of the humanities, but their testimony was delivered in feeble and uncertain tones.

It could not be expected that literature would be of richer growth than the other elements of the national existence. Circumstances will not produce genius; but if genius appears, it cannot unfold its full energies in a troubled or tired epoch. Even the eagle is powerless to

mount higher than the atmosphere which is elastic and strong enough to sustain the beat of its wings. The best literary work of the time was done by the first Silesian School, which included men of very considerable natural gifts. Opitz, its founder (1597–1639), did good service by protesting against the pernicious custom of interlarding the language with foreign words, and by impressing on his contemporaries the fact that in poetry form is not less important than substance, and that the poet, consciously or unconsciously, must work according to fixed laws. He was, however, deficient in fire and impulse, and his own verses rarely merit a more favourable epithet than "correct." Paul Flemming (1609–40), had he lived, might have given to his spiritless, baffled age the noblest poetic interpretation it was capable of; and, even in his short career, he achieved work which bears the stamp of real worth. His fine sonnet "An Sich,"[1] which retains its hold on the imagination of his countrymen, would alone betoken an upward-striving nature, perplexed but not overwhelmed by the sorrow and mystery of life. But he was struck down on the threshold of serious manhood, and there was no one whose shoulders were worthy to bear his mantle. Andreas Gryphius (1616–64) reflected only too faithfully in his melancholy lyrics the gloom of the time, and his dramas, although an advance on previous efforts, afford no evidence that he understood the most elementary conditions of dramatic effect. Personified abstractions play a prominent part in them, and characters intended to be real are in no case firmly and consistently outlined. When we consider that at the time the work of Gryphius began that of Shakespeare had been for many years closed, we obtain an accurate measure of the backward condition of German literary aim and endeavour.

If the first Silesian School left behind it little that is of more than historical value, the second left nothing the

1 This sonnet will be found in Dr. Buchheim's excellent collection of German lyrics, "Deutsche Lyrik," p. 28.

most indulgent critic could praise. In its time intellectual life had well-nigh perished, and the genius of the nation could only haltingly follow the steps of foreign leaders. Hoffmannswaldau (1618–79), the Coryphæus of this school, adopted second-rate Italian models, and strove to conceal in clouds of magnificent phrases the utter absence of ideas. There are probably few more pretentious or barren verses in existence than the heroic epistles with which he associates the names of famous lovers; and it may be added that not many German writers have ventured to display a more cynical contempt of ordinary decency. Lohenstein (1635–83) sounded an even lower deep. In the whole range of literature there are not to be found more bombastic and grotesque performances than those of this once famous writer. His dramas have hardly more coherence or reasonableness than the visions of a nightmare. The age had indeed sunk low which looked upon the author of "Cleopatra" and "Ibrahim Bassa" as a man of genius.

If it is possible to express a preference among things almost wholly bad, the so-called Court poets must be pronounced rather superior to the ridiculous second Silesian School. Falling in with the tone of their lords, they professed themselves the disciples of French masters, so that they were at any rate saved from the mad extravagance of Lohenstein. Their verses are, however, for the most part wholly meaningless performances. They were chiefly written on such occasions as the birth, marriage, coronation, or death of some member of a princely house; and hardly once in the dreary volumes which preserve them for posterity do we light upon a couplet which suggests genuine laughter or tears. The authors have a stock of conventional sentiments always at hand, and these they bring forward on appropriate occasions, decking them in approved ornaments. By far the most genuine of these "poets" was Canitz (1654–99), a minister at the court of Brandenburg, who wrote for his own amusement. Frederick the Great pronounced him "the Pope of Germany;" but

that only proves that Frederick had a very imperfect apprehension of Pope's vivacity, power of delicate expression, and satiric force. Canitz was but an imitator, and displayed none of that impressive mastery of language which we find in "The Rape of the Lock" and "The Essay on Man."

It sometimes happens that an epoch incapable of presenting the facts of existence in new forms in the ideal world of art is rich in satirical literature. In the most degraded periods there are always a few on whom the follies and miseries of their time jar harshly; and if these attempt to give utterance to their thought, ethical ideas inevitably predominate over all others. Although the satirical literature of this time does not rank very high, it had decidedly greater vitality than most other forms of writing. Logau, who lived at the beginning of the period, is keen, terse, and incisive; and towards its close, Neukirch and Wernicke may be named as satirists who aimed shafts, sometimes well directed, against the vices and prejudices of contemporary society.

Of even more importance than the satirists were the authors of religious lyrics, in which we find the most harmonious utterance of what noble sympathies still survived in the heart of Germany. Here and there were men too weary of the real world, too hopeless of its improvement, even to attack its failings. They turned with sadness from an existence out of which almost every trace of beauty and order had vanished, and sought consolation and repose in communion with heaven. It was this class which gave to the Pietist sect its best representatives, and enabled it for a time to exert on the nation an influence which, in the absence of grander forces, may be considered healthful and elevating. There is hardly in literature anything more pathetic than the strange sense of nearness to a Divine world which pervades the hymns of Gerhardt and Tersteegen. To these men a personal God was a more intimate reality than the outward world they saw and

handled, the thirsting after righteousness a more powerful motive than any mere physical craving. They never, as many even of the best English hymn-writers sometimes do, strike a vulgar or untrue note; the Hebrew psalms alone express the sorrows and joys of religious life with like simplicity, intensity, and directness. It is perhaps the most significant fact of the period, that its truest literary achievements are in a department in which no other Aryan people has excelled, and which is in reality as alien to the German as to the French or English intellect.

The degradation which followed the Thirty Years' War continued among the higher classes during the whole of the eighteenth century. There were brilliant exceptions, as in that Weimar court which has cast a sort of glamour over the political system that produced it, and leads even some Germans to regret the downfall of the petty princes. But the rulers of most of the small States went from bad to worse, separating themselves by a constantly increasing gulf from their subjects, trampling more and more on every popular right, and displaying enthusiasm only in the hunt for new modes of debauchery and extravagance. The notorious Augustus the Strong of Saxony, with his three hundred and fifty children, may be taken as an extreme type of his class. While thousands of his subjects could just save themselves from starving, he would devote millions of thalers to a single *fête;* and his innumerable mistresses and favourites amassed vast fortunes. His successor spent hours daily in his private cabinet smoking tobacco, his highest mental effort confined to the pregnant question, "Brühl, have I money?" To which the all-powerful minister unfailingly replied, "Yes, your Majesty." But this dullard was ingenious enough to know how to wring from the people their hard-won earnings, with which he too enriched those who ministered to his passions. Scores of princes might be named who were equally unjust, equally reckless. From about the

middle of the century, a favourite mode of raising money was to sell soldiers to foreign powers; and feeble protests against this infamous custom were treated as crimes of the first magnitude. A good many museums and picture galleries, by which succeeding generations have largely profited, were founded; but these rarely indicated a true love of art. They were, for the most part, mere occasions for the gratification of vulgar vanity. When Frederick the Great was at the height of his power, the only influence he exerted on the majority of the princes was to develop among them a taste for military display; and sometimes his imitators, rather than have no army at all, would establish a force in which the officers outnumbered the men. A sense of moral obligation would rarely have checked the excesses of these despots, but a sense of the ridiculous might have had some effect. They never saw, however, the comic aspect of their rule; they were only impressed by its grandeur.

So far as active participation in political life was concerned, the nation made little or no progress in the eighteenth century. It hardly occurred to any one that a people has a right to a voice in the determination of its own affairs. Princes existed for the express purpose of ruling; that was their business, and if they neglected it, it was usually deemed no part of a subject's duty to remind them of the fact. In a political sense, Germans were in truth a nation of slaves, and patriotism, in any large meaning of the term, wholly disappeared. The inhabitants of a State which happened to have a good sovereign might be proud of his virtues, but for generations after the Thirty Years' War there were scarce any symptoms of the old pride in the common German name.

In other respects, there were at the beginning of the eighteenth century many signs of reawakening. Trade began slowly to revive, so that the middle class, especially in the free towns, was partially released from sordid cares, and had leisure to think of other things besides

the needful supply of daily bread. In the absence of political activity, it turned its attention to such literature as then existed, and encouraged writers who met its taste. There being no other channel for the national energies, the stream which flowed in this naturally became broad and deep. It is from this time we must date that devotion to purely ideal interests, associated with a strange disregard of the outward world, for which the Germans afterwards became famous, and which long made them the most unpractical, hesitating, and at the same time intellectually most active people in Europe.

Among the writers who helped to arouse in the minds of Germans discontent with their position, and a longing after better things, a prominent place is due to Thomasius (1655–1728), a professor first at Leipzig, and afterwards at Halle. He had, indeed, a contemporary who ranks far higher in European literature, Leibnitz, to some of whose ideas we shall have to return at a later stage. It was Leibnitz who first turned into Germany that vast philosophical movement, which has not yet quite reached its goal, that had been begun and carried on in England by Bacon and Locke, on the Continent by Descartes and Spinoza; and he strove with generous enthusiasm to breathe new life into old imperial forms, and to heal the differences between the Catholic and Protestant communions; but, writing chiefly in French and Latin, he addressed scholars rather than the people, Europe rather than Germany. Thomasius, on the other hand, was without influence outside his own country, and it was emphatically the people to whom he appealed. At a time when life had become rotten to the core, and appearances were alone worshipped, there burned in this man a fiery zeal for reality, a passionate scorn for pretence. And he made it his career to proclaim that there was still something which men ought to believe in and to reverence. The wretched pedantry of the ordinary scholar, the hateful intolerance of the ordinary theologian, he vehemently

attacked; and to the superstition manifested in such outrages as the trial and burning of witches, he may be said, by the sheer force of his personal indignation, to have given the death-blow. He was followed by the "enlightened" philosophers, who opposed to the orthodox religion the principles of the English Deists. They ardently defended so-called natural religion, and were never tired of denouncing positive faiths as the invention of priests. Wolf (1679–1754), starting from the philosophy of Leibnitz, and striving to bring it within the limits of a rigorous system, nominally upheld Christian doctrine; but his utterances were capable of many interpretations, and there were included among his supporters men of the most diverse schools. During the greater part of the eighteenth century his philosophy was generally accepted at the universities, and exercised considerable influence on the thought of the whole of educated Germany: an influence naturally increased by the fact that he had suffered for his opinions.[1]

One of the first evidences of growing popular intelligence was the support given to weekly papers of a class corresponding to the "Spectator" and the "Tatler," and professedly written in imitation of these models. The two principal periodicals of this kind were "The Discourses of Painters" and "The Patriot," the former issued in Zürich, and written by Bodmer and Breitinger, who afterwards

[1] The story of Wolf's dismissal from his professorship at Halle throws considerable light upon the social and political condition at least of Prussia in the first half of the eighteenth century. His orthodox colleagues, anxious to get rid of him, entreated Frederick William I. to silence so dangerous a lecturer, accusing him of teaching Fatalism. The King long hesitated, as a popular professor brought many foreign students, and therefore a good deal of foreign money, into the State. At length he asked "what this Fate might be, about which the theologians were so terrified." One of Wolf's enemies, knowing well Frederick William's weak point, replied, that "if some of his tall grenadiers deserted, Wolf would say it was Fate that did it, and it would be unjust to punish them, since no one can resist Fate." This settled the question. An order was instantly issued requiring the philosopher, "under pain of the halter," to quit Prussia within forty-eight hours!

became famous as the chiefs of the so-called Swiss School; the latter in Hamburg, where a number of tolerably well-known writers contributed to it. Unluckily, Germany had no Addison and Steele; and if it had had them, it did not possess that free and richly varied society which furnished the English humourists with ample scope for raillery and sarcasm. The "Discourses of Painters" and "The Patriot" are now very dreary reading, their maxims commonplace, their wit without point or delicacy; but they served a useful purpose in their day. Through them the middle class was induced once more to look inwards upon itself, to reflect on its own failings, wants, and difficulties; there was a gentle stir of thought, and, however slight that might be, however poor the ideal it called forth, it was infinitely better than mere stagnation, and did, in fact, soon lead to great consequences. When thoroughly alive again, the energetic German intellect could not satisfy itself with well-meaning but rather dreary platitudes.

The popular poets of the first half of the eighteenth century contrast favourably with their immediate predecessors, and afford the most satisfactory proof that dawn was really gliding out of the darkness. Günther (1695–1723), who, like Flemming, died when his powers had scarce lost the freshness of youth, has been honoured by the high praise of Goethe;[1] and in lyric poetry he was Goethe's best forerunner. In his songs and odes there is none of the empty formalism of the Court poets, or the fantastic license of the second Silesian School; they have that incommunicable charm which can be felt but not defined—the charm of life, of real feeling, yet of emotion controlled by art for its own purposes. In his special paths Günther is equalled by none of his contemporaries; still, there are several in whom we may detect at least an

[1] "He may be called a poet in the full sense of the word." "He possessed all that is necessary for the creation in life of a second life through poetry."—Wahrheit und Dichtung, part ii. book 7.

attempt, more or less successful, to return to nature for inspiration. Brockes had the merit of being one of the first to introduce the Germans to English literature. He translated Thomson's "Seasons," and wrote many descriptive poems as nearly as possible in the manner of his English predecessor. Haller, whose real talent lay in a quite different direction, adopted the same style, but associated with his somewhat wearisome descriptions the treatment of great moral problems. A descriptive poet of far higher rank, a man of genuine poetic feeling, was Kleist, whose poem on "Spring" has a tender beauty that still appeals to German readers.

Hagedorn, a man of the world, who had lived in England as secretary to the Danish Embassy, was distinguished as a writer of odes, songs, and fables. In form he modelled himself on Horace, but his feeling is usually sincere, bright, and gay. His aim was to make life more cheerful and natural, and many a sly blow he dealt, half laughingly, at the pretentious solemnities and inanities of the time. Allied to Hagedorn were the Halle poets, of whom the chief were Lange and Gleim. They also imitated Horace, but took Anakreon as their favourite guide. They wrote many harmless lyrics, in which they were especially ardent in their praises of the joys of friendship.

Of more importance than these writers, if we judge his importance by the extent of his influence on the age, was Gottsched, the Leipzig poet and critic (born in 1700). He is now chiefly remembered by the ludicrous description Goethe has given of a visit to him in his old age,[1] when his fame was a memory of a distant past; and in some respects he deserved that his name should excite ridiculous associations, for he was vain, jealous, and pompous. But he aimed at great things, and did work that was not wholly fruitless.[2]

[1] Wahrheit und Dichtung, part ii. book 7.

[2] Gottsched's true significance was first pointed out in Danzel's learned treatise, "Gottsched und seine Zeit," by which all later historians of German literature have largely profited. A full and impartial account of Gottsched will also be found in Biedermann, ii. pp. 481–497.

The feeling which spurred him to activity was regret that Germany was without a great national literature. Fancying that hard work properly directed was alone needed, he set himself to lay the foundations of the structure he wished to see built. He enlightened the Germans on the history and resources of their language, striving to free it from the admixture of foreign elements, and to fix a particular dialect which should serve as the organ of literature for Germans of all states. Critical canons were laid down by him, which, he confidently maintained, if faithfully obeyed, would enable any sensible man to produce a faultless poem on any subject with which poetry should deal; and he gave innumerable specimens of the application of his own rules. But it was by means of the drama that he chiefly endeavoured to awaken the intellectual life of his countrymen. Before his time the German drama was in a pitiful condition. At the courts, the opera and French and Italian plays were alone in favour; the princes did not dream that any of their boorish subjects were capable of writing plays to which ears polite could listen. Hence the native stage was in the hands of strolling players; and they, addressing uncultured audiences, were content with tragedies and comedies of wild extravagance, in which no attempt was made to remain true to the facts of life; in which the rough jokes of the "Hanswurst" invariably played a leading part. Gottsched resolved to replace these barbarities by a thoroughly organised theatre. Fortunately there was in Leipzig an actress, Frau Neuber, of considerable talent and refinement; and she, with a company she had gathered around her and trained, entered for a time heartily into the schemes of the reformer. For her, he and his energetic wife translated plays from the French; and he wrote several original dramas, of which the most ambitious was "The Dying Cato," an imitation of the "Cato" of Addison. Although Gottsched condescended to follow Addison's lead, he did so only because Addison wrote in the French

style; the great period of the English drama he regarded with abhorrence. Corneille, Racine, and their followers had alone, he believed, since the days of Greek tragedy, worked in the true dramatic spirit; and Germans could achieve success only by submitting to the same laws as their rivals. As for the old native drama, that contained not even a germ of truth; and Gottsched expressed his contempt for it by publicly burning Hanswurst in 1737, as Luther had two centuries before burned the Pope's bull.

For about ten years Gottsched ruled supreme in the German literary world. He founded societies, edited periodicals, and carried on a vast correspondence with enthusiastic admirers in all parts of the nation. Never had the drama excited so much attention; but it was taken as a matter of course, since Gottsched asserted it, that any play which was not an imitation of the French was crude and vulgar.

It is impossible, however, permanently to check the inward growth of an epoch, and Gottsched ultimately found that he was fighting against irresistible forces. Bodmer, the Swiss writer already named, translated Milton's "Paradise Lost;" and Gottsched, regarding this as a sort of personal insult, directed against the monstrous poem the whole array of his critical artillery. The translator replied, and thus began the most famous literary controversy of the time, in which not only the chiefs, but the rank and file of the Swiss and Saxon Schools—Gottsched and his followers were called the Saxon School—took part, the reading public enjoying with incredible zest the rude assaults of the combatants. It would be useless to enter into the details of a conflict which is for us without significance, and which was soon forgotten amid more serious struggles. The question in dispute related to the material which it is the poet's business to mould into artistic form. The Swiss School maintained that what is marvellous and startling constitutes the poet's world; and this principle led them to the strange conclusion that fables are the highest

species of poetry, since in fables events are always least in accord with daily experience. Gottsched, on the other hand, argued that common sense must never be outraged by poetry, and that in so far as the poet moves beyond the range of ordinary thought and passion he deserts his proper function. The general tendency of the Swiss School was to remove the working of genius from law; that of the Saxon to subject it to a set of rigid and narrow rules. Bodmer would have had the poet disport himself without reference to literary tradition; Gottsched wished to dominate the individual altogether by tradition interpreted in a dogmatic and mean spirit. The controversy, although conducted without adequate understanding of the issues it involved, was to some extent a crude anticipation of that which long afterwards arose between the Romanticists and Classicists. The young and ardent spirits of the time sided, for the most part, with Bodmer; and, as a matter of fact, although it is difficult to decide whether he or his opponent was farther from the truth, it was he who exercised the most genial influence on talent, and most effectually encouraged men to be loyal to their own nature.

Childish as in some respects this dispute was, it was a sign of life, and left behind it results of infinitely greater importance than itself. A larger class was induced to interest itself in literature, and writers began to think more deeply on the ends of literary energy and the grounds of enduring literary achievement.

The slight breeze that moved across the dull intellectual life of the middle class was not without influence on the universities. At Halle, Thomasius had produced some impression on the prevailing pedantry; and in 1737 the opening of the university of Göttingen, which was planned in accordance with the highest ideas of the time, gave promise of an era of splendid work. Leipzig university took its place in the new movement through Professors Christ and Ernesti, scholars possessed by the fresh enthusiasm of the Renascence, and with ideals which the thought of the

Renascence was not mature enough to evolve. "Alterthumswissenschaft"—the science which enables men to reconstruct in idea the life of the ancient world—was slowly formed; and the Greek and Latin languages, instead of being treated simply as ends, began to be looked upon by a select few as instruments of culture. Considerable curiosity was also evinced with regard to the problems of physical science; and philosophy, as exhibited in the elaborate system of Wolf, formed the subject of earnest if not very intelligent or fruitful debate.

It was but a feeble advance Germany had made about the middle of the eighteenth century—that is, a hundred years after the Thirty Years' War—for not by a swift bound or two does a people leap to one of those grand epochs in which it awakes to a knowledge of its own wealth, and fills its eager hands with treasures; but there was no longer utter hopelessness, the calm, which is no calm, of spiritual death. There was in the air a tone of expectation; after the dreary years in the wilderness it was hoped a promised land might be near, and leaders fancied they might catch a glimpse of its olive-covered hills, its blue, peaceful skies.

The expectation was not disappointed. In Goethe, Schiller, Kant, and Fichte the genius of the nation aroused itself, and surpassed the highest anticipations. It was the task of Lessing to prepare the way for the splendid movement represented by these names; and in fulfilling it, he lived a true and great life, and did work which for its own sake ranks with that of the most brilliant of his successors.

CHAPTER II.

BOYHOOD.

GOTTHOLD EPHRAIM LESSING was born on January 22, 1729, in Kamenz, a small town in Upper Lusatia, a province of what was then the Electorate of Saxony. Kamenz was one of six Lusatian towns which in the Middle Ages wrung from the kings of Bohemia and from the Emperors the rights of free cities, and which in the wars of the fifteenth century had their own flag and were defended by their own troops. Past the town flows the Elster, which at a point near Wittenberg is united with the Elbe; and in the neighbourhood is a hill called the Hutberg, from a tower on which—the Lessing tower—there is a pleasant view of the surrounding country. In 1845 Kamenz was almost destroyed by fire, and the only remaining building with which Lessing was directly connected is St. Mary's Church, in which his father officiated for more than fifty years.

The Lessing family can be traced back to the latter part of the sixteenth century, when the name of Clemens Lessigk, a Saxon Lutheran clergymen, appears in a list of signatures to an important ecclesiastical document. His family lived during three generations at Schkeuditz—a small place vaguely described as between Leipzig and Halle—where Lessing's great-grandfather, Christian Lessing, was burgomaster. The prosperity of the good burgomaster came to a sudden end, for Schkeuditz was one day burned to the ground; and his son Theophilus, born immediately before the close of the Thirty Years' War, had to be sent to the university of Leipzig with no

more than two thalers in his pocket. Theophilus, however, had spirit and ability, and by acting as tutor to the sons of the burgomaster of Leipzig, managed to keep himself alive with credit until he took his Master's degree. It is worth notice that the title of the thesis he wrote on this occasion was "De religionum tolerantia," and that he pleaded for the toleration not only of the three chief creeds in Germany, but of all creeds. This was so bold a stroke in the seventeenth century that Karl Lessing, the brother and biographer of Gotthold, ventures to hint that Theophilus just missed being the German Voltaire. To less partial critics it will occur that even then one might be tolerant without being able to write "Candide;" but it is at any rate significant that the great liberator of German theological thought in the eighteenth century came of a free stock. Theophilus afterwards settled in Kamenz; and here he rose from one small dignity to another, and at last became burgomaster, a position he held for twenty-four years. He died at the age of eighty, a year before the birth of the grandson for whose sake his career has some interest for posterity.

When Lessing was born, his father, Johann Gottfried Lessing, was one of the Lutheran clergymen of Kamenz, where, a year or two afterwards, he became pastor primarius or head pastor. He was in many respects above the average of his class. He had been educated at Wittenberg, where he not only became a sound classical and Hebrew scholar, but learned French and English: the latter a language little studied at that time in Germany. The career he proposed to himself was that of a theological professor; and he was so distinguished at the university that he would have had no difficulty in gratifying his ambition. But when about twenty-five years old—he was born in 1693—he was invited to become one of the pastors of his native town, and this invitation he felt it his duty to accept. He remained ever afterwards in Kamenz, and must long have been its most important citizen. In 1725

he married Justine Salome Feller, the daughter of the pastor primarius whom he succeeded. They had twelve children, ten sons and two daughters. At that time even a pastor primarius was but poorly paid, and with their slender resources the worthy couple found it hard to bring up their family in the manner supposed to become their position. They were often deeply in debt, but the elder Lessing was something of a Stoic and never allowed himself to be overwhelmed by circumstances. All through life he continued the studies he had begun so well at Wittenberg. Day after day, his son Karl tells us, he shut himself up for hours among his books, rarely going out except to fulfil some pastoral duty. And his labours were not without result. He translated several of Tillotson's works, and made some original contributions to theological literature. His style is singularly free from the pedantries which deface the writings of German divines of that time. Indeed, it is not mere fancy that has led some writers to detect in his modes of expression a little of that clear ring which is so marked in the works of his son. Although by no means a bigot, he was strictly orthodox, having all the horror of his sect for the Roman Catholic Church, and disliking equally Pietism on the one hand and Scepticism on the other.

He was a man of very decided character. No one could defend more energetically rights on which he thought anybody was encroaching. His temper was quick, and he would often utter a hasty word he afterwards regretted. Lessing gives an amusing picture of him in a fragmentary note,[1] which does not seem to have been intended for publication. One evening Lessing was about to write the eleventh of his "Antiquarian Letters," when a letter was brought to him saying it was not immediately wanted, and might not be wanted for a long time. "'That is annoying,' I say to myself; 'how the man will triumph!' Let him triumph! I will not fret myself; or rather, I shall quickly

[1] Sämmtliche Schriften (Lachmann and Maltzahn), xi. (2), p. 401.

work off my anger that I may become calm again and not injure my sleep, about which I am more anxious than almost anything else in the world." "'Now then, my dear Irascibility,' he continues, 'where are you? You have an open field; break loose, give yourself free exercise! Rascal! you will only take me by surprise. And because you cannot here take me by surprise, because I myself incite you and spur you on, you will, in spite of me, be lazy and quiet. What you will do, do quickly. Make me gnash my teeth, strike my forehead, bite my under lip.' This last I really do, and immediately my father, exactly as he was, stands before me. That was his custom when anything annoyed him; and when I wish vividly to recall him, I have only to bite my under lip in this way. If I think of him very vividly in connection with anything else, I may be sure that my teeth will at once fasten on my lip. Good, old boy, good! You were a good man, but hot tempered. How often have you yourself complained to me—complained with a manly tear in your eye—that you so easily lost your temper, so easily hurried yourself into passion! How often have you said to me, 'Gotthold, take warning by me; be upon your guard; for I fear, I fear—and I should gladly see myself improved in you.'"

One does not like the good pastor less for his impatient little outbursts, for they were the outbursts of an essentially generous nature. His children loved and respected him; and when he died, Lessing, then past forty, felt his loss keenly. Poor as he was, he was always ready to share what he had with those in greater want than himself; and in order to educate his sons he deprived himself of many things even then deemed by workmen necessaries of life.

It is a popular notion that all remarkable men have remarkable mothers. This is not perhaps based on a very wide induction; at any rate, Lessing's mother was not at all remarkable. An honest, faithful woman, looking up to her husband with unbounded reverence, bearing meekly

the honours of motherhood that rained rather thickly on her: that is all we know in her favour. Her ideas of propriety were rigid, as became the daughter of one pastor primarius and the wife of another. She did not like to see her children doing anything out of the way. That they should be respectable and like the children of other people summed up her wishes for them; and when any of them ventured to form a scheme of life for themselves, she could show herself bitter and obstinate.

The eldest of the family was a daughter, Justine Salome; next to her came Gotthold Ephraim. If we may judge from his ripened character, he was probably a lively, happy, restless child: a surmise which is confirmed by a portrait of him when about seven years old, which was some time ago found among old lumber in a room connected with St. Mary's Church. By his side is his brother Theophilus feeding a lamb. Gotthold has a book in his hand, and there are books around and under his chair. "It is extremely remarkable," says a writer in the "National Gazette," [1] describing this portrait, "how the features of the man Lessing may be traced in those of the boy: high brow, wide, clear, open eyes, the nose broad and energetically prominent, on the lips a pleasant smile. He is not a beautiful boy, but a boy full of bold liveliness." The "wide, clear, open eyes" were dark blue; and they harmonised well with his rich masses of light-brown hair.

The circumstances amid which he grew up were of the simplest kind. Every day, morning and evening, the pastor assembled the family for prayers; and as he was the author of a catechism, it is hardly necessary to say that the instruction of his children in the dogmas of the Lutheran faith was not neglected. The studies of his father had some effect on Gotthold. The old gentleman used afterwards to say that his eldest son, from his earliest years, learned with ease and pleasure, and liked to wile away time by glancing through books.

[1] Stahr's G. E. Lessing, i. p. 11.

For some time Lessing was taught at home by Christlieb Mylius, a cousin, of whose brother we shall afterwards hear. By-and-by he was sent to the town-school of Kamenz. At an early period the pastor and his wife consulted as to his future calling; and, whether he was considered unusually clever, or simply because it was proper that the eldest son should adopt his father's profession, it was decided he should become a clergyman. Both were most earnest that this scheme should be carried out. The Frau Pastorin especially set her heart on seeing Gotthold in the pulpit. Nothing could be more fitting, she thought, than that he should carry on the traditions of his family on both sides; and then, perhaps—who could tell?—he too might one day become pastor primarius!

There were at that time three great schools in Saxony, called Fürstenschulen, or Prince's Schools, which the famous Elector Maurice had formed, at the time of the Reformation, from three suppressed monasteries. They were intended mainly for the education of boys who were to become Lutheran pastors. At one of these, the school of St. Afra, in Meissen, a scholarship, in the gift of the Carlowitz family, was obtained by Lessing, and thither he was sent in the summer of 1741. The discipline of the school was very strict, and had something of a monastic character. A great deal of time was spent in the public reading and exposition of the Bible, and the boys were systematically taught theology and Church history. In other respects their training was chiefly "classical." Some hours in the week were devoted to French, mathematics, geography, and history; and the older pupils received lessons in Hebrew, logic, and moral philosophy. But such studies were kept wholly subordinate to the study of Latin and Greek; and of these, Latin had the largest share of attention. The chief classical authors were read, but not, it would seem, in a very intelligent spirit. Only a few schoolmasters can be expected to

arouse in their pupils a living interest in ancient life and literature. One very good reason is that only a few schoolmasters have themselves this interest; and those who have, do not find that the higher sympathies are easily touched in boys. Hence it is perhaps inevitable that a so-called classical education should in most cases consist of little more than some acquaintance with grammatical rules, and a certain skill in applying them in composition. In our day, comparative philology, when mastered by a teacher who knows his work, is a powerful means of awakening the interest of even dull lads; but in Lessing's day comparative philology did not exist. It probably never occurred to the masters of St. Afra's that it would be helpful to boys to realise that the Latin and Greek over which they spent so many dreary hours were once the languages of actual men and women; that the works it was the business of their lives slowly to spell out had been conceived by writers who had lived and suffered, and had been enjoyed by readers to whose best thoughts they had given utterance. Great ideas and beautiful images were neglected for niceties of grammar, and the last flower of culture was believed to be the power to put together Latin and Greek words in the form of "verses."

It is sometimes supposed to add interest to the character of a distinguished writer when a brilliant manhood can be contrasted with an indolent youth; but no such contrast can be presented in the case of Lessing. His was one of those natures which ripen to the last, but flower early. "He is a horse that must have double fodder," wrote the rector to his father, when Lessing had been more than four years at school; "tasks which others find too hard are child's play to him." He afterwards wrote very forcible and accurate Latin prose; and his Latin epigrams are as terse and true to the spirit of Martial as any of his day. Yet he is said to have cared little for the composition exercises with which the larger part of the boys' time was daily occupied. It was actual contact

with the minds of ancient authors that kindled his sympathy and interest.

There was then, as now, in the higher class of German schools, an admirable custom of leaving the boys at freedom for some time each week to work as they pleased. They were expected to make good use of the time thus granted them, but no particular study was prescribed. The favourite writers of Lessing during these free hours were Theophrastus, Plautus, and Terence. His early love for the two latter authors is easily explained. In the seclusion of a country school he had little opportunity of feeling the charm of actual life; but he had all the impulses which lead even a boy to find in the real world of humanity the best stimulus to thought. In later years he was no recluse; and he did not make the mistake, so commonly made by literary men, of exalting literature above the world which it is its function to interpret. He mingled constantly with his fellows, deliberately seeking out those with tastes and aspirations not his own. This is one cause of that absence of formality, that freshness of tone, which give interest even to his least important writings, and which are to be found to the same extent in the works of no other German. For one with so great a capacity of enjoying the daily existence of men, no ancient poets could have a more intense fascination than Plautus and Terence. The Greek tragic poets move in a world above a boy's reach. It would be possible for Lessing even at school to read them with enjoyment; but the sublime sorrows they depict, their sense of what is great and awful in man's relations to the Kosmos—he could not then have the inward eye to which these splendours are revealed. But by the Latin writers of comedy the clash of human interests is not taken too seriously; it excites a laugh, and its graver aspects are forgotten. Here, therefore, Lessing found exactly what met his half-conscious craving for the movement of life; and the same causes, although in a less degree, would account for the

pleasure he took in Theophrastus, if, as we may assume, it was the "Characters" he was fond of reading. "Theophrastus, Plautus, and Terence," he wrote,[1] when about twenty-five, "were my world, which I studied with delight within the narrow limits of a monastic school. How gladly should I wish those years back!—the only years in which I have lived happily."

The mathematical master at St. Afra's, Herr Klimm, was a man of high ability, and of considerable literary as well as scientific culture. As a rule, the boys did not understand or love him, and, like many very refined schoolmasters, he had difficulty in maintaining his authority. Lessing was greatly attracted by him, and owed much to his influence. It was a favourite dictum of Herr Klimm's that language ought not to be treated as an end in itself, but only as the key by which the treasures of literature, science, and philosophy are unlocked. This accorded with all the tendencies of Lessing's intellectual life, and deepened and strengthened them. The influence of his friend led him to study mathematics. He never carried his mathematical knowledge very far; still, his achievements in this department were mentioned with particular praise in the official reports of his later years at school. He translated three books of Euclid, began to collect materials for a history of mathematics, and when he left school the subject of his leaving oration was "De mathematica barbarorum." In asking his friend Mendelssohn, in 1758, to give him his opinion of the line of beauty, he wrote: "But write to me so that I may understand you, for I know less of geometry than I once did. When, however, I return to Berlin, you will be surprised how much I shall devote myself to that study." Sir William Hamilton has told the world that mathematical training is incompatible with philosophical thinking. If that is true, so much the worse for philosophical thinking; but it may be questioned whether any other study has a more invigorating and steady-

[1] Sämmtliche Schriften, iv. p. 4. [2] S. S. xii. p. 129.

ing effect on the growing mental powers. Mathematics do not teach a man to look carefully to his premisses, but they do teach him to see, when his premisses are assumed, that he does not draw from them illogical conclusions. Lessing's astonishing power of clear statement in argument, his readiness to detect a fallacy, and his delight in pursuing principles to their last issues, were unquestionably to a large extent due to his experience in grappling with geometrical problems.

It is noteworthy that he also acquired, from intercourse with his mathematical master, some interest in physical science: an interest he retained throughout life. To the same influence he owed considerable acquaintance with the best contemporary literature of Germany.

Lessing's close study of Plautus and Terence had not only a strong effect on his general culture; it awakened within him a passionate love for comedy. This was deepened by his reading of French, and probably even thus early of English literature. He even began to evolve dramatic schemes of his own. "In years," he tells us,[1] "when I knew men only from books—happy he who never knows them more intimately!—I occupied myself in forming conceptions of fools, whose existence in no way concerned me." One attempt at comedy—"Damon; or, True Friendship"—he completed; and although in itself worth little, it is for a boy an extremely creditable production, and interesting as the first step in a career in which he was afterwards to win high distinction. The aim of the piece is to present a perfect type of loyalty and generosity. Two friends, Damon and Leander, love a widow, who for some time cannot make up her mind which she will marry. At last Lisette, her maid, hits upon a device by which they may be tested. Each has at sea a vessel in which is embarked his whole fortune, and it is announced to them that he will be the lucky suitor whose venture is most successful. Immediately before hearing this, Leander has

[1] S. S. iv. p. 4.

learned that his ship is lost. He is in despair, but Lisette suggests the idea of proposing to Damon that, as a proof of friendship, they should exchange vessels; and he is treacherous enough to grasp eagerly at this plan. He is, however, forestalled by Damon, who is unwilling to have even the chance of gaining an advantage over his friend; and, in ignorance of the supposed misfortune, asks Leander to agree that their profits shall be equally divided between them. With a great show of exalted feeling, Leander assents. Ultimately it turns out that Damon's vessel, not Leander's, has been lost; and then, of course, Leander forgets their arrangement, and claims the widow. But she has learned their true character, and, in favour of Damon, sets aside not only Leander, but a third suitor who suddenly appears, and, on the strength of great riches, asks her hand. Leander, detected, is about to move off in disgrace, but Damon generously calls him back and forgives him. "I know," he says, "how difficult it is to find a friend, and if, for a first offence, one deserts him, one will seek for a lifetime and find none." "Damon," replies Leander, "judge from these tears whether I am affected." "Damon, Damon," the widow exclaims, "I fear, I fear, I will become jealous, not, indeed, of a woman, but certainly of Leander!"

A scheme of this sort is the work of one who knows neither life nor the stage; but it is remarkable that anything having the appearance of a comedy should have been written at all; and here and there the reader is surprised by a certain vivacity both of idea and expression.

A much more ambitious effort was Lessing's second play, "The Young Scholar" ("Der Junge Gelehrte"); but as this was only partly planned and executed at school, it would be out of place to do more than refer to it here. He also attempted original work of another kind. In Haller's style he composed a little poem on "The Plurality of Worlds," some lines of which, years afterwards, he thought "tolerably well expressed." Fol-

lowing in Gleim's footsteps, he amused himself by translating and imitating Anakreon.

A little paper, written in 1743, for his father, on "The likeness of one year to another," displays in a crude form many of the characteristic qualities of his prose style. He alludes with contempt to the "melancholy, discontented, and ungrateful people," who continually complain that the world is steadily degenerating. The object of the paper is to show, on grounds both of reason and Scripture, that the present times are as good as the past, and that the future will be as good as the present. Such phrases as "The world has the greatest perfection of its kind;" "All things in the world harmonise with each other;" "God maintains the world by a number of forces which He created for it;" "These forces exist in the same number and form as at the beginning of the world," prove that already, when only a boy of fourteen, he knew something —probably through talk with Herr Klimm—of philosophical speculations. The style is somewhat stiff, but the ideas are logically arranged, and his meaning shines through his words with absolute distinctness.

While at St. Afra's, Lessing not unnaturally caught the pedantic tone of the place. A letter addressed to his sister in 1743 is written in an amusingly severe tone. He lectures her for not writing to him, and says he is not sure whether she is unable or merely unwilling to write. Both suppositions are, in the eyes of the young moralist, shameful. As to want of power, he cannot understand how a person can be reasonable, and talk reasonably, and yet be unable to compose a letter. "Write as you talk, and you will write beautifully." She had left school when twelve years old, because it seemed disgraceful to learn anything after that age; "but who knows which is most disgraceful—to learn something even in one's twelfth year, or in one's eighteenth or nineteenth not to be able to write a letter?" As he writes on the 30th of December, it occurs to him that he must express some good wish for his

sister. "At this season almost every one has good wishes. What shall I wish for you? I must think of something special. I wish for you that all your worldly tastes may be stolen from you. That would, perhaps, be more useful to you than if some one put into your purse a New Year's gift of a hundred ducats." A boy of fifteen who writes in this superior way is not exactly an agreeable person; but it is easy to detect a kind heart and unusual power of intellect beneath his harmless airs of patronage.

"A good boy, but somewhat satirical," wrote an inspector concerning this energetic pupil. The fact, however, that he could design such a comedy as "The Young Scholar" is proof that his mocking humour was directed as much against his own faults as against those of his fellows. His simple truthfulness of character is illustrated by a little incident that occurred towards the close of his school life. Some of the older boys acted as inspectors, and these met the rector, the associate rector, and masters on Saturday evenings to talk over matters of common interest. It happened one week, while Lessing was an inspector, that the boys came together in the mornings very late for prayers. The rector knew the cause very well, but did not like to state it openly. In the hope, therefore, that the truth would somehow come out, he mentioned the fact, and asked if any one could explain it. "I know," whispered Lessing to his neighbour. The rector, overhearing him, asked him to tell what he knew. Lessing hesitated, but, on being urged, honestly declared, "The associate rector does not come punctually; the pupils, therefore, think there is no hurry." "Admirable Lessing!" exclaimed the astonished culprit, piqued by this truthful statement. He never quite forgave the offence. When Lessing had left school, and his brother Theophilus was being entered as a pupil, the advice of the associate rector to the new-comer was: "For heaven's sake be diligent, but not so pert as your brother!" The worthy schoolmaster had other reasons for not being particularly

fond of Lessing, for probably no other boy saw so clearly the weak points both of the system of teaching and those who carried it out. "When in Meissen," he wrote to his father in 1750,[1] "I saw that one had to learn much there which one could make no use of in the world, and now I see it far more clearly." A few months later, in 1751, the associate rector, in reporting the progress of Theophilus, having made some disparaging remark on his former pupil, Lessing wrote again to his father:[2] "It has pleased the good associate rector to express once more a little in this letter his dislike of me. He may, however, be assured that I have all respect for him, although I do not regret that I have not followed him in everything. I know well that he cares little about making reasonable men of his pupils, if he can only make them thorough Princes' scholars; that is, people who believe blindly in their teachers without considering whether or not they are pedants." It is clear that Lessing's reverence for authority, even in early youth, was of a very modified kind.

A boy of independent spirit, who begins to judge his masters by an ideal standard, soon longs for release. The routine of school irritates him; he has received from it all the good it is able to give, and feels that his intellectual life is hampered and depressed by tasks which once fostered and enriched it. This was the case with Lessing. The full course at St. Afra's lasted six years, but before he had been five years there he had reached the highest division of the first class. He therefore entreated his father to set him free. The pastor, who was a great stickler for forms, disliked the idea of his son going away before the proper time; but at last, in the spring of 1746, consented to apply for his dismissal. To the first application the school authorities returned an unfavourable answer; but Lessing, thirsting for liberty, gave his father no peace till a fresh effort was made; and this time the request was granted. On June 30, 1746, he took his leave; and we may believe

[1] S. S. xii. p. 23. [2] S. S. xii. p. 25.

that he went home in high spirits, glad to escape from trammels that had become intolerable.

A letter to his father, dated February 1, 1746, contrasts strongly with the one written to his sister more than two years before. It is simple and direct, without a trace of unhealthy self-consciousness. At his father's request he had written a poem in praise of his patron, Lieutenant-Colonel von Carlowitz. The pastor had praised this little achievement, but thought it ought to be shorter. In his letter Lessing promises to do his best to improve it, but characteristically adds that he thinks it a sad waste of time to employ himself in such a manner. "My best comfort in the matter is, that I do it at your command."

The letter refers to an experience which had brought Lessing into rough contact with the outer world, and which greatly quickened his desire to get away from school. The stormy career of Frederick II. of Prussia, then a vigorous man of thirty-two, had fairly begun, and all Europe saw that in him it had to deal with a new force of vast significance. In 1744, seeing that Maria Theresa was making way against her rival, Charles VII., and fearing, on good grounds, that as soon as she was mistress of her resources she would try to regain Silesia, he declared war against her a second time. For about two years the monarchs confronted each other, Maria Theresa bent upon winning back her lost lands, and Frederick equally determined to keep them. Saxony, an ally of Frederick in the first Silesian War, aided the Queen of Hungary in the second, hoping to absorb one or two Prussian towns. The result was, that the contest was carried on partly on Saxon ground; and the last battle of the war was fought at Kesselsdorf, a village not far from Meissen, on December 15, 1745. The excitement at Meissen was intense. In every house in the town, Lessing tells his father, there were thirty or forty wounded soldiers; and hardly any one dared go near them, so great was the dread of fever.

"In the whole town, however," he continues,[1] "there is no place, compared with its former circumstances, in a more pitiful position than our school. Formerly it was full of life; now it is quiet as the grave. Formerly it was rare to see a single healthy soldier in it; now there is a crowd of wounded here, who cause us no little trouble. The dining-room has become like a slaughter-house, and we are compelled to dine in the smaller auditorium. The boys who went away are so afraid of disease that they have as little desire to return as the school managers have to set up again the three tables whose use has been discontinued." Even in the midst of such surroundings Lessing writes calmly, but he was deeply impressed by what he saw, and obtained a glimpse of the horrors of war which dissipated all sentimental illusions as to its real nature.

[1] S. S. xii. p. 8.

CHAPTER III.

LEIPZIG.

I.

WHEN Lessing went home from school he was in his eighteenth year. Having seen little of men, he was shy and awkward, but he had already given evidence of an eager and restless spirit, and had dreams of the future which were not bounded by the small world of Kamenz. As his parents, whatever his own plans might be, destined him for the Church, he would probably have been sent to the university of Wittenberg, which, as the home of the Reformation, kept up its fame as a theological school; but in connection with the Leipzig university a scholarship could be obtained from the Kamenz magistrates; and the pastor primarius, who had now a large family, was too poor to let this chance slip. Lessing, therefore, went to the university of Leipzig in the autumn of 1746.

Leipzig is now a larger and richer town than it was then, but relatively it is not nearly so important. It was the centre of the book trade of Germany, and its half-yearly fairs were visited by crowds of well-to-do traders from all parts of the country. A constant stir of life was thus kept up, and a considerable class amassed wealth enough to enable it to form a leisurely and cultivated society. In Goethe's "Wahrheit und Dichtung" we have a vivid picture of the city about twenty years later: it was not essentially different when Lessing first entered it as a young and ambitious student.

The university was the chief centre both of the social

and intellectual life of the town. It was then, as it is now, one of the leading German universities. In theology it had no professors that could excite the interest of a keen and ardent intellect; orthodox Lutheranism was taught in the old dry manner. Nor were the law and medical faculties particularly distinguished. The philosophical faculty, however, possessed in the two professors already named, Ernesti and Christ, the most influential representatives of the awakened interest in thought and learning that had begun to manifest itself. Ernesti was at this time an enthusiast for classical literature, and was particularly distinguished for his skill in interpreting its allusions and spirit by reference to the remains of ancient art, and the evidence then brought to light respecting ancient institutions and customs. Professor Christ was quite as finished a scholar, and had a far more extensive knowledge of art, having had excellent opportunities of studying it both in Italy and the Netherlands. He may be regarded as the forerunner of Winckelmann, on whom, as on Heyne, he exercised considerable influence.[1]

Gottsched, although his authority had been crippled by his controversy with Bodmer, retained much of his old power, and he had gathered around him devoted admirers, who considered it their function to defend and spread abroad his ideas. A number of them had founded a journal, the "Bremen Contributions," published simultaneously at Leipzig and Bremen. It began by loyal adherence to the creed of the master, but gradually diverged into a freer and simpler style. Among the contributors were the brothers Schlegel, father and uncle of the two Schlegels who, in a later generation, were the critical leaders of the Romantic School. Johann Elias Schlegel is admitted to have had peculiar power as a writer of comedy, but an early death prevented him from doing it full justice. Gellert was also

[1] For an elaborate discussion of the merits of Ernesti and Christ, see Danzel's Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, pp. 64–79, who, however, according to Guhrauer, somewhat overrates the importance of Christ.

a contributor. He had been a successful professor for about two years, and was soon to become the most popular author in Germany: an author whom Frederick the Great, after a famous interview, condescended to call "the most reasonable of German *savants*." Klopstock was another member of this circle. He was a little older than Lessing, but was, like him, a student, and had come to Leipzig only a few months before him. His "Messiah" had been partly planned for some time, and in about two years the three first cantos appeared in the "Bremen Contributions." Sentimental enthusiasm, vanity, and piety were already among the marked elements of his character.

II.

For a little time Lessing was rather overwhelmed by the contrast between the still life of St. Afra's and the incessant movement of a great town. In a letter from Berlin to his mother, two years afterwards, he mentions that his first months in Leipzig were months of solitude. Not even at Meissen had he been so much alone. "Always among books, occupied only with myself, I thought of other men as seldom perhaps as of God."[1] Theology, as taught by the professors, he quietly ignored, and gave his attention chiefly to literature. Professors Christ and Ernesti were his favourite teachers, and from both he received light and stimulus.

One endowed with so much energy and such warm sympathy with life was not likely to remain long a mere recluse. He began to look about him; he associated with other students, and the first result was—that he felt ashamed of himself. "I found," we read in the letter to his mother already quoted, "that books might make me learned, but would never make a man of me. I ventured out from my room among my fellows. Good God! what an inequality I felt between myself and others! Rustic shyness, a stiff and ungainly body, complete ignorance of polite manners,

[1] Sämmtliche Schriften, xii. p. 7.

hateful airs which made every one think I despised him: these were, in my own judgment, my good qualities." He forthwith exercised himself so diligently in dancing, fencing, and vaulting, that his body soon ceased to be "stiff and ungainly;" and by constant association with men he acquired that manliness and freedom of bearing which distinguished him throughout life. Disgusted with the formalism and pedantry of the university, he became irregular in his attendance even at the lectures of Christ and Ernesti; and although he must have read a great deal, he read after no prescribed system. At first he shared a room with a student of more approved habits; but this young gentleman, who became a rather distinguished scholar of the old type, ultimately felt it necessary, after many vain expostulations, to part from a companion who so recklessly set custom at defiance.

Lessing was of an eminently social nature. In one sense he was all his life a lonely man, for he had ideas that were but ill understood by his most valued friends. But wherever fellowship was possible he sought after it, and found in it not only relaxation for overwrought energies, but the air and sunshine that best foster the permanent moods of noble minds. It might be thought that, of all social circles open to him, he would have preferred that of the writers to the "Bremen Contributions." They were, however, too much of a clique to suit his free sympathies; so that, although he knew several of them individually, he kept away from them as a body. A young professor, named Kästner, had in some respects a nearer affinity for him than any other whom he met in Leipzig. Kästner lectured on mathematics and philosophy, but he had also studied physical science, and maintained fresh interest in literature. Besides his regular lectures, he held disputations in which his students met him on equal ground, each being invited and encouraged to speak freely. The subjects of debate were philosophical, but under his generous guidance they often trenched on every field of

thought. Nothing was assumed as starting-point or goal; the aim was simply to evoke truth from the contact of idea with idea. This was precisely adapted to Lessing's nature. There are thinkers of great type who reap little profit from discussion. Their mental processes are calm and slow; they are perplexed by the din of contention; if opposed, their most familiar ideas momentarily slip from their grasp. To them truth is something to be silently brooded over; to the inmost depths of their spirits light reveals itself through peaceful meditation. Lessing was not of this order. It was by the dialectic method alone that he rose from height to height and widened the range of his vision. He loved to confront an opinion with its opposite, to thrill with the stir and glow of intellectual battle. To hear any conviction strongly stated roused in him the desire to qualify it, or to suggest grounds for calling it in question. Thus in conversation he would often take a side with which he had no sympathy; not for the barren pleasure of victory, but to see how much could be said by those who really held that for which he argued. He was sometimes blamed by one party for maintaining views which another found fault with him for rejecting. During the Seven Years' War, for instance, his friends in Leipzig were shocked by his Prussian sympathies; while, after he went to Berlin, he offended his friends there by being, as they thought, too partial to his native Saxony. Even in his inward life it was through struggle that he pushed towards new conclusions. If there was no actual opponent, he imagined one, and equipped him with the surest and most polished armour he could devise. It was, therefore, natural that he should feel drawn towards Kästner, and heartily enjoy his disputations. These disputations were, indeed, the only part of university work to which he faithfully attended during the whole of his student life.

A more intimate, although not more fruitful, relation than that formed with Kästner, was his friendship with Christlob Mylius, the brother of the young man who had

acted for some time as Lessing's tutor. The name of Mylius had long been familiar to the Lessing family, and their associations with it were far from pleasant. When Lessing was at the Kamenz school, the rector, a young man fresh from Leipzig university, and an enthusiastic admirer of Gottsched, ventured to publish a small work on "The Theatre as a School of Eloquence." Intense was the anger aroused in Kamenz by this audacious act. That an instructor of youth, whose duty it was to present to his pupils the very form and body of Lutheran propriety, should have a word to say for the theatre, seemed to pious parents a terrible instance of depravity. The magistrates rebuked the offender; and pastor primarius Lessing denounced from the pulpit his dangerous doctrines. When the rector soon afterwards left Kamenz, Mylius, who had then been a year at the Leipzig university, addressed to him a number of verses congratulating him on his departure from so ignorant a town, and making fun of the magistrates and the pastor. For this liberty Mylius was condemned to pay a fine or suffer a week's imprisonment; and ever afterwards he was held in abhorrence by the authorities he had laughed at. By the time Lessing became a student, he had made himself notorious in Leipzig as a man of strange and wayward impulses. To appear "respectable" was not one of his ambitions. According to Karl Lessing, Mylius with shoes down at heel, worn stockings, and tattered coat, was a familiar figure in the streets. As he was poor, friends would sometimes ask him to share their quarters; but they usually had abundant reason to regret their good nature, for he could never be brought to understand that he was not in every sense at home, and his habits did not commend themselves to a fastidious taste. He was, however, universally acknowledged to be a man of talent. Even the great Gottsched had recognised his ability; and encouraged by the literary dictator, he had written several plays which had been well received. He was an ardent student of physical science,

in which he acquired considerable distinction. A paper, entitled "The Freethinker," he had edited for about a year, afterwards publishing the numbers in a single volume; and it had attracted attention both by its freedom of tone—its license, according to the theologians—and its comparatively vigorous style. While Lessing was in Leipzig, Mylius edited two other papers, one after the other, with the titles, "Encouragements to the Pleasures of Sentiment," and "The Investigator of Nature:" petty efforts in journalism which, by their association with Lessing, have been saved from oblivion. Mylius was not at heart serious or noble enough to feel the need of or to excite profound love; but Lessing was struck by his originality, and their acquaintance soon ripened into such friendship as is possible without the awakening of the deepest sympathies.

Another friend of Lessing at this time was Naumann, who was associated with Mylius in his journalistic work, and who wrote without difficulty any amount of prose or verse that might be demanded of him. He was a kindly, good-humoured man, a little puzzle-headed, fond of fun, and never taking amiss the lively banter of his friends. He always had a supply of manuscript poems in his pocket, which he would read on the smallest provocation, manifesting considerable skill in warding off hostile criticism.

Nearer Lessing's own age, and affording more congenial companionship, was a young student, Weisse, who had entered the university a year or two before him. Although without a touch of genius, Weisse had literary ambition, and was in the end fairly successful as a dramatist and critic. Lessing and he were for a time almost inseparable; but Weisse himself, in his autobiography, confesses that the benefit derived from their intercourse was wholly on his side. He had been imperfectly trained at school, and had but slight acquaintance with literature. Lessing, who had already ranged over wide fields, and into whose mind ideas crowded too swiftly for full and immediate control, com-

municated to his friend something of his own knowledge and enthusiasm; and we may well believe that in this case the mere act of giving was its own great reward.

III.

We have seen that even at school Lessing amused himself by writing comedies and anacreontic verses. It was not likely that, amid the varied life of Leipzig, in daily intercourse with men whose energies were wholly devoted to literature, he should be less active. He now wrote most of those lyrics which were afterwards published in a little volume entitled "Trifles" ("Kleinigkeiten"), and a good many of them appeared in the two journals edited by Mylius. These lyrics are usually rather severely handled by critics, but in his own time they were received with much favour, and at once gave him the rank of a genuine poet. It is impossible, in reading them, not to think of the lyrics produced twenty years afterwards by the next man of high literary genius in Germany: Goethe. And perhaps it is by comparing Lessing's lyrics with those of young Goethe that we may best arrive at a true estimate of their worth.[1]

The lyrics of Goethe's youth are among the most exquisite of his writings. Their subtle melody would alone give them immortality, for Goethe had that first essential of the lyrical poet, a perfect sense of rhythmic movement. He could hardly have given unmusical utterance to the passing emotions which are caught in song, and many of his verses linger in the memory like the soft beat of moonlit waves on the shore. They are also marked by a deep and passionate feeling for nature. It is not that Goethe scatters over his lyrics very many images of natural beauty, although, when they occur, they are always precise and firm; but by incessant references and side glances

[1] Goethe's youthful lyrics are nowhere seen to so much advantage as in the splendid edition of his early writings entitled "Der Junge Goethe" (Hirzel, 1875).

we are made to feel as the background for his ideas, and for the whole drama of human life, the splendour of the outward universe. A phrase causes us to confront the dawn; an apparently almost accidental line calls up the vastness of the heavens, the glory of the stars. And we are brought face to face with nature, not for its own sake merely, but for the sake of all that it symbolises: the mysterious Presence with which we of the modern time have learned to associate its processes. Their treatment of love is another of the notes of Goethe's youthful lyrics. Full of fire as he was, he does not give us pictures of mere passion. His feeling is refined and purified as it passes into poetry, and although intense, is suggestive of tenderness and delicate grace.

When we turn from Goethe's to Lessing's lyrical performances, we breathe a wholly different atmosphere. The melody of Lessing, although correct and lively, is without charm; and in none of his verses do we find a trace of Goethe's love for natural effects. Indeed, it may be as well to point out here that he had none of that enthusiasm for nature which afterwards became so common, and has in our day led to so much sham sentiment. He once shocked a too rapturous friend by expressing a wish that spring would sometimes appear in red—the everlasting green was so fatiguing! He succeeded and partly belonged to a generation which occupied itself mainly with intellectual problems, and much of whose poetry was in reality only ethics in verse. We may, however, doubt whether nature would have been more fascinating to him if he had been born in the latter instead of the earlier half of the century. He had not those vague longings, those strivings of spirit, with which Romantic poetry has taught men to connect the spectacle of the universe; his objects were definite, his ideas clear and exact. And in man and his spiritual relations he found such ample scope both for fancy and reason, they were to him invested with so perennial a charm, that it is hard to conceive him, under any

circumstances, finding his themes elsewhere. In this respect, as in many others, his character approached the antique, or what is usually considered the antique, rather than the modern type.

As regards love in Lessing's lyrics, we do not find in them a trace of Goethe's elevation and nobleness of sentiment. Love and wine are almost his sole subjects, and both are regarded from precisely the same standpoint. That is, love is looked on merely as an amusement of a leisure hour, an amusement that may at any moment be taken up and dropped: there is no hint that it may be the absorbing passion of a lifetime.

It would, however, be unfair to measure these "Trifles" by rules to which they were not intended to conform. They were not meant to be taken very seriously; and they have at least one great merit—they are not dull. The writer aims throughout at terseness and vividness of phrase, and his satire, if it does not cut very deep, is sprightly and amusing. But, after all, the chief interest even of the best of Lessing's lyrics is now biographical rather than artistic. We read them rather because of the light they cast upon his sympathies and tendencies than for any beauty they possess in themselves. It would be easy to overrate their value even in this respect, for the impulse under which he wrote them came more from without than from within. It was the fashion to compose such verses; and it was not to be supposed that he would refrain from doing what everybody else attempted. Hence we should go far astray if we were to imagine that in his lyrics we have the key to the deepest facts of his life. If we were to take him at his word, we should attribute to him many strange opinions: that it is possible to drink too much, but never to drink enough; that it is as absurd for a man never to be drunk as for a woman never to be in love; that one would wish to be a Turk for the freedom of the Turkish code of marriage, but that its restrictions as to wine must make one change one's mind; that if the

husband of a scolding wife goes too often to the wine-shop, she naturally revenges herself in a still more questionable manner. As for Lessing himself, it would be necessary to believe that he passed his time in a round of sensuous enjoyments. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Even if his inclinations had lain in this direction, his circumstances would not have allowed him to lead the gay and joyous existence portrayed in his songs. He was poor, and, for the most part, his outbursts into a world of charming license must have been of a strictly imaginary kind. His father, who had little sympathy with poetic raptures, and supposed that if a man, even in verse, expressed an opinion or liking he wished to be taken literally, at a later time applied to some lyrics which fell into his hands an epithet more distinguished for vigorous honesty than for politeness. This is how Lessing responded:[1]—"I do not believe the most severe moral critic can blame me for them. *Vita verecunda est, Musa jocosa mihi.* Thus Martial excused himself in a similar case. And one must know me little who supposes that my feeling in the slightest degree harmonises with them. They deserve nothing less than the name which you, as all too severe a theologian, give them. If you were right, the odes and songs of the greatest poet of our time, Herr von Hagedorn, would deserve a much more angry description. In truth, they originated in nothing except my desire to experiment in poetry of all kinds. If a man does not try to discover what is most suitable to his powers, he will often choose a sphere in which he cannot rise above commonplace, whereas in another he might perhaps be able to attain excellence. Perhaps you have discovered that I broke off in the middle of this work, tired of practising myself in such trifles."

At the same time, Lessing would not have experimented to so large an extent if he had not found genuine pleasure in doing so. We are, therefore, justified, without holding

[1] S. S. xii. p. 16.

him too strictly to the sentiments he expresses, in forming from his verses a general picture of his life at Leipzig; and the picture we form is that of a brilliant, active, light-hearted youth, not necessarily neglecting the graver problems of existence, but taking enjoyment frankly wherever it offers itself, delighting in the society of congenial spirits, laughing often and heartily, and passing many a good-humoured joke at the foibles and pretences of society. He is as far removed as possible from pedantry; he throws off as much as he can the manners even of the genuine student, and affects those of the careless and refined man of the world.

IV.

Important as were communion with other minds and first efforts in literature, the dominant influence on Lessing during his stay at Leipzig came from the theatre. The company with which Gottsched had tried to carry out his scheme of founding a national drama had for some time been broken up; but Frau Neuber had herself formed another, which included several excellent actors, among them Koch, who afterwards became one of the greatest players of the age. Plays in Gottsched's style were still represented, but his taste was no longer the exclusive standard of excellence, and occasionally Frau Neuber ventured to give a fair trial to the productions of young authors. It was in her theatre that Lessing gained his first insight into dramatic work.

Those who have always been accustomed to the theatre cannot realise the feeling of one who has been trained in a family of narrow creed, and who in the days of hot youth finds himself suddenly in front of the stage. A new and fascinating world is revealed to him, and till the first excitement gives way to a more critical mood, he feels that he cannot too often come under the spell by which he has been so enchanted. It was thus that the theatre impressed Lessing. Night after night he went there with his friend

Weisse; and through the introduction of Mylius he was allowed behind the scenes, and soon became a daily companion of the actors, whose frank manner and freedom from conventional trammels delighted him. A certain young actress, Fräulein Lorenz, whom in later years he did not particularly admire in her professional capacity, won from him by her beauty a very much warmer feeling than esteem. In short, the theatre was to him what his parents had intended the lecture-rooms of solemn theologians to be; and sometimes he even seriously thought of becoming an actor.

It was natural that one who was thus fascinated by the theatre, and who had brought with him from school a first attempt at comedy, should soon think of writing for the stage. He began with translations from the French. Partly, it is said, with the view of being placed upon the free list, but partly, doubtless, to prepare themselves for original work, he and Weisse translated together Marivaux's "Hannibal" and Regnard's "Le Joueur." Of these, Lessing's share of the first has been preserved. It is in rhymed Alexandrines, and is written with considerable force and dignity. His first dramatic work of any importance, however, was "The Young Scholar," of which both the plot and the characters are wholly his own. Talking one day with some friends about a play in Gottsched's manner which had been much applauded, he hotly condemned it. He was met by the retort that it is easier to blame a thing than to do better; and feeling his pride touched, he accepted the challenge. "Damon," although Mylius had thought so well of it as to publish it in one of his journals, Lessing felt to be too meagre and crude for representation; but in the plan of "The Young Scholar," which had also been drawn up at school, he saw the germ of real excellence, and he resolved to develop it into a complete play. When it was finished, he gave it to Kästner, who expressed a high opinion of it. Next Frau Neuber received it, and, with a true instinct, she recognised in it the dawning of genius,

and at once accepted it. It was forthwith put into rehearsal, and in January, 1748, was produced. "If," he wrote some time afterwards,[1] "the merit of a comedy is to be measured by the laughter of the spectators and the clapping of hands, I had sufficient cause to think that mine was none of the worst."

Lessing's career as a dramatist may now be said to be begun, and for a time it was his absorbing occupation to sketch and complete plays. Young dramatists are usually attracted rather by tragedy than by comedy, for a certain effect is more easily produced by pathos than by wit; and, besides, powerful intellects in the first freshness of their vigour are often fascinated by the problems of sorrow and conflict. Lessing, however, was as yet more nearly touched by the lighter than by the sad aspects of existence, and its lighter aspects were, therefore, those he chose first for representation.

In these early works his supreme model was undoubtedly Molière, the prince of comic writers, for whom, notwithstanding his subsequent revolt against French dramatists, his admiration never wavered. In his greater works Molière's method is essentially this: he takes a character in which some particular quality of human nature, some vice or foible, has obtained abnormal growth. He studies its manifestations, and seeks to show how this peculiarity rejects in life whatever is repugnant to it, and attracts every element that nourishes it, how it warps the most sacred affections and dominates the whole being. The central figure is thrown into a world of ordinary men and women, who form a fitting background for the exhibition of its strange evolutions. Pursuing this method, he has left untouched scarce a single form of feeling or conduct that is capable of comic exaggeration; and it is because, when dealing with grave aberrations, such as those of the miser, the misanthrope, or the hypocrite, his knife cuts so deep into the heart of humanity, that his laugh is so often

[1] S. S. iv. p. 4.

closely allied to a sob or a cry. In his pages we find once for all the types of nearly every enduring failing of society. They may be clad in the dress of Louis XIV.'s court, but beneath the outward disguise we detect the elements that reappear in different shapes in all ages and under all skies. Molière's power, however, is not exhausted in the central conceptions of his comedies. The world in which Tartuffe moves is as true to life as Tartuffe himself; and the like may be said of the environment of every one of the heroes of his masterpieces. There are no more enchanting pictures than those he paints of sweet human affection, of fidelity to the ideal, of sprightly wit, of unaffected dignity and self-control. Figures that in other hands would be puppets start into life at his touch. If, in his highest achievements, he thinks it right to evoke a character at all, however unimportant, he gives it as much independent vitality as is necessary to harmonise it with his larger purpose.

The method of Lessing was precisely that of Molière. In all his early comedies except "The Jews," which was written for a particular purpose and is conceived on a different plan, the main attention is given to a hero or heroine who has allowed one motive to absorb all others. We have, for instance, a pedant, a woman-hater, a free-thinker, who, as presented to us, are nothing apart from the special quality which gives each his name. And around the marked representative of a class are grouped, as in Molière, figures who act as a foil to his eccentricities. Although, however, forged in the school of so great a master, these early dramas of Lessing, if they did not bear his name, would not now be read, for they lack nearly all the qualities of true art. The central conceptions are invariably roughly drawn. With the fine instinct of genius, Molière knew always at what point to stop in his delineations; he saw precisely when the effect he wished to produce was realised. Here Lessing fails. His exaggerations are usually too far removed from the facts we have a daily opportunity of observing; and having made a point, he

makes it over and over again. What at first amuses thus ends by being tedious; comedy degenerates into farce. And if we go from the chief figure to his minor characters, we lose, as a rule, all interest whatever. With few exceptions, they are merely a set of names behind which no individuality can be recognised; at best, the majority of them are conventional men and women helping to unravel the plot by conventional actions. In one instance—that of the clever, intriguing lady's-maid—the same character occurs in every comedy with tiresome regularity. Even her name, Lisette, is always retained. Yet there are here and there traits of character and clever strokes of satire which indicate keen observation of life, and give promise of higher work in future. It is wonderful that so much was achieved by a young writer in a country which was not only without a high dramatic tradition, but in which were none of the living conditions necessary for the production of true comedy. Molière addressed a society in which there was a fine perception of what is fit and becoming in the intercourse of man with man, and a lively appreciation of the comic element in the violation of the laws of morality and good sense. In these respects Lessing's country was still almost barbarous compared with France.

Although Molière's method was that which Lessing followed, he was more indebted for particular hints to later French writers; above all, to De L'isle and Marivaux. From the latter, for instance, he derived the character of Lisette, with the idea of giving to her the prominent place she usually occupies. As regards the construction of these plays, it is wholly French. He strictly observes the unities; the characters are carefully balanced against each other; and an effort is made to exclude whatever could prevent the story from being systematically unfolded. This marching to the French word of command had one permanently good result. French dramatic literature has never been dissociated from the stage. It may be read

with pleasure, but it is intended for the theatre and can only in the theatre be seen in its full strength and beauty. The influence of this fact may be traced even in the least important of Lessing's early writings. They are all constructed with a view to stage effect, and this is true of the latest of his pure dramas.

"The Young Scholar" ("Der Junge Gelehrte") is by far the best of the plays written or planned at Leipzig. It is so because it deals with a phase of life with which Lessing was familiar, which he had himself passed through, and which, in the chief German university town, he must have seen everywhere. The hero, Damon, in spite of his very un-Teutonic name, may be taken as a type, crude but not altogether untrue, of the Teutonic pedant of his day. Vanity forms the basis of his character; he accepts as his due unmeasured flattery, and boasts of his acquirements without the smallest sense of shame. We soon become weary of his monotonous folly, but the tedium is occasionally relieved by a little flash of wit. This is the case when Lisette, the faithful maid of Juliane, the young lady whom Damon's father wishes him to marry, tries to induce him to decline the match. By means of wild flattery she wins his good opinion; she then pretends to malign Juliane, describing her with every fault it is possible for a woman to have. To her surprise, he is enchanted; he was before opposed to the marriage, but he has always thought that if a scholar cannot find a wife who would take her place in a treatise *de bonis eruditorum uxoribus*, he ought to seek one who would be distinguished in a work *de malis eruditorum uxoribus*. He becomes, therefore, quite eager to marry Juliane. The concluding scene of the play is equally well designed. He has sent to the Berlin Academy of Sciences a dissertation on atoms, and when the play opens is looking eagerly for a letter announcing that he is the successful competitor for the prize of the year. It never occurs to him that his rivals can have approached him in depth of learning, and he

enjoys in anticipation all the delights of assured success. Towards the end of the comedy the letter comes and is torn open. It informs him that the friend who was to have laid the dissertation before the Academy had too much regard for Damon even to submit so absurd a production to a learned body. He is furious, and in a fit of rage and disappointment vows at once to leave a country incapable of appreciating its great spirits.

Another of the plays written at this time, "The Old Maid" ("Die Alte Jungfer"), was afterwards, like "Damon, or True Friendship," struck by Lessing from the list of his works. Far more than "The Young Scholar," it reveals the uncertain touch of one who is slowly feeling after his real vocation. The story is the familiar one of a woman no longer young, who gives herself the airs of youth and grasps eagerly at the first chance of marriage. Whether from incapacity to do justice to the idea, or because Lessing was too good-natured to bear hardly on a failing which, after all, has its sad as well as comic side, he fails to trace a consistent character. We are apparently meant to laugh at the old maid, and can in reality only be sorry for her. On a far higher level, both in design and execution, is "The Woman-Hater" ("Der Misogyn"), which, however, was repeatedly retouched at a later period. The woman-hater will not hear of the marriage either of his son or daughter. The former, however, persuades his betrothed to dress in a man's clothes, and to let herself be introduced as her brother; and she thus manages, by humouring the old man's prejudices, to secure his good will. The daughter's marriage is brought about by impressing upon her father, that if she is given to her lover, with whom he has a lawsuit, he will present his enemy with a veritable Pandora's box. The play contains nothing very original or brilliant, but the dialogue is sometimes animated, and some skill is displayed in drawing amusement from an unpleasant foible.

Besides the plays he completed, Lessing left more than

fifty dramatic outlines and fragments.[1] As in the lyric so in the drama he deliberately experimented, testing his powers by a great variety of efforts. In a few instances, he so plainly struck upon the right path that he followed it to the end with pleasure; in others, he saw that only moderate success would be attainable and quietly passed on to more hopeful fields. Considerable interest attaches to these slight schemes. They are like the preliminary studies of a painter, and may occasionally suggest to a dramatic writer not only fruitful ideas, but the conditions which, in the eyes of a master, were incompatible with a noble result.

The most striking of the fragments produced during his student life at Leipzig is the beginning of a tragedy entitled "Giangir." It is in unrhymed Alexandrines. The scene is laid at the Turkish court, and the main character, so far as the scheme can be made out, is a sultana who intrigues to secure the succession of her son at the expense of the true heir, the son of a previous sultana. Small as the fragment is, we can see that it was written as much under the influence of French models as were his comedies. It has the regular march of ideas and imposing dignity of phrase which mark the classic tragedy of France.

Although writing under an impulse derived almost wholly from French literature, Lessing was not ignorant even thus early of the English drama. He probably knew Shakespeare as yet only by name; but he appears to have been a diligent reader of the Restoration dramatists. The idea of one of his sketches, "The Gull" ("Der Leichtgläubige"), is taken from Wycherley. Weisse had written a comedy with this title which was favourably received. Lessing objected that it was in no sense a work of art, but only a series of situations in which a credulous person was exhibited, and that there was no reason why any number of similar situations might not be added. "In the spirit of emulation which

[1] These have been carefully collected in Hempel's edition of Lessing's Works, and published in a separate volume, accompanied by notes and prefaces, by Robert Boxberger.

existed between the two friends," says Weisse, "Lessing immediately undertook to sketch a 'Gull.' For this purpose he took from Wycherley's 'Country Wife' the idea of Horner, but he never executed the plan." Weisse had evidently very vague notions respecting "The Country Wife." Horner was as far as possible from being a "Gull;" and in any case, Lessing was incapable of occupying his genius with one of the most repulsive conceptions in literature. It was the weak and silly Sparkish whom he intended to present in a German form as Woldemar, replacing Alithea by a young widow, and Harcourt by a less bold and unprincipled Courtal, the intrigue being carried on mainly by the unfailing Lisette and Woldemar's valet. Another sketch, "The Good Man" ("Der Gute Mann"), which also probably belongs to this period, is based on "The Double Dealer" of Congreve. Although the conceptions are in both cases English, Lessing works at them in a purely French spirit. He tones down their coarseness, removes unnecessary characters and incidents, and aims at giving to the development of the plot greater simplicity and directness.

V.

While "The Young Scholar" was in rehearsal, towards the end of 1747, Lessing came one day into Weisse's room flushed and indignant, and throwing a letter upon the table asked him to read it. It was from the pastor primarius, and Weisse saw that there was something seriously wrong. Dark rumours had for some time been reaching Kamenz that the high-spirited young student was not attending to work in the approved method. The pastor was even told that his son regularly went to the theatre, associated with actors and with the freethinker Mylius, and had written a play for representation. To realise how this news affected him, we must remember the horror with which the theatre was then regarded by the orthodox clergy. To them it seemed, as it still seems to certain sectaries both in England and Germany, the very gate of hell; and to say that

a young man took pleasure in it was to say that every high moral principle in his nature had been undermined. The first impulse of the good pastor, therefore, on being assured that Gotthold had reached this depth, was to take him home and snatch him from swift-coming ruin. He decided, however, to try what could be done by earnest expostulation in writing. The letter was very severe in tone. It made particularly bitter reference to Mylius, whose satirical verses had never been forgiven, and to the actors; and a hint appears to have been thrown out that, if better courses were not adopted, the Kamenz magistrates would withdraw their allowance, which had been granted solely to enable him to pursue theological study. Lessing felt his self-respect wounded by this harshness, and passionately declared to his friend that, instead of withdrawing from the theatre, he would have his full name printed on the bills as author of "The Young Scholar," and send a copy to every magistrate in Kamenz. Then they might do their worst! Weisse expostulated, and his calmer view of the necessities of the case prevailed.

A crisis soon came. Notwithstanding the terrible reports as to her son's mode of life, the Frau Pastorin justly thought that he would not object to a Christmas cake, and sent him that pleasant gift by a friend who happened to be visiting Leipzig. Lessing shared it with some actors, a bottle of wine being also produced on the occasion. The friend announced this fact at home, and added that a play by the young scapegrace had either been or was about to be performed. This intelligence struck terror into the hearts of the worthy couple. Gotthold had indeed descended with swift steps from the godly precepts of his parents! His mother wept bitterly, and his father, feeling sure that one who wrote plays, and made friends of actors and a sceptic, could not be controlled by ordinary means, sat down and wrote the following letter:—"On receipt of this, take your place in the mail-coach at once, and come to us. Your mother is

dangerously ill, and wishes to speak to you before she dies."

The Frau Pastorin was probably never in better health than when this missive was written, but it was necessary to save Gotthold, and the wilful boy had to be managed as one plays a salmon before landing it. Lessing suspected the true character of the dangerous illness; but it might be real, and he was too loyal a son to run any risks. He started immediately for home.

Karl Lessing has given us a vivid and evidently a true description of what followed. Soon after the letter was sent away a keen frost set in. The pastor scorned to show anxiety, but his wife was of less stern stuff. She reflected on the long, dreary journey, and felt sure her unlucky son would suffer from the cold. If the summons could but be cancelled! It was very bad, no doubt, to write plays; but to be frozen in a dark mail-coach! "He will not come," she kept saying. "Disobedience is learned in bad company." This sounded slightly hostile, but it meant that motherly sympathies were touched, and that she fervently hoped obedience would be postponed till the sunshine was brighter. He came, however, and stepped shivering into the room. "Why did you come in the cold?" asked the anxious mother, forgetting all about the last words she was to utter on her deathbed. "Dearest mother," answered Lessing, "you wished it. I suspected you were not ill, and I am heartily glad you are not."

So favourable were the impressions of the first few days that Lessing's parents gave him that most decided of all proofs of forgiveness: they paid his debts. For he had not been able to play a brilliant *rôle* behind the scenes without incurring expenses that soon outran his slender resources. The discovery must have slightly shocked the pastor, but he soon saw that no very great mischief had been done. Although Lessing had plunged into a world with which his parents could have no sympathy, of which they could hardly form a vague conception, he retained a

healthy moral tone; and he differed from his father, not in considering life without responsibilities, but as to the nature of these responsibilities for him. The pastor was delighted to find that, far from neglecting his studies, he had deepened and widened his intellectual culture, and could even be interested in theology and church history. To convince his mother that he could be a preacher if he chose, he took the trouble to compose a sermon; but, alas! he could not be asked to edify one audience after having entertained another.

Lessing had too decidedly chosen his mode of life for any change to be effected in it by outward influences. During his brief stay at home, therefore, he carried on his favourite studies, working at his comedies and occasionally writing anakreontic verses. A number of his poems fell into the hands of his elder sister. Her sense of propriety was outraged, and she relieved her feelings by putting the papers in the fire. The younger brothers hastened to inform Lessing of what had happened. His grief was not overwhelming, and he revenged himself by throwing a handful of snow into the virtuous young lady's bosom—to cool her pious zeal, he said.

So completely did he succeed in dispelling the illusions of his parents respecting him, that in about three months they consented to his return to Leipzig. They were obliged sorrowfully to admit that he could not now become a clergyman; at the same time, it seemed to them a matter of course that he should adopt one or other of the recognised professions. It was, therefore, arranged that he should study medicine and philosophy with a view to his attaining a position at the university.

On going back to Leipzig, he adopted the title of a medical student, a title he kept up for several years; but he gave no more heed to medical than to theological professors. In the only one of his lyrics which has really remained popular—it is still sung with great vigour by German students—he makes fun of the profession; and as

it displays fairly well the lively spirit which marked him at this period, it may be as well to translate it. Only it must be remembered that half its charm lies in the quick, trochaic movement of the original:[1]—

"Yesterday, brothers, can you believe it? while I enjoyed the juice of the grape (conceive my horror!), Death came to me.

"Threateningly he swung his scythe, threateningly spoke the fearful skeleton: 'Come, thou slave of Bacchus! come, thou hast caroused enough!'

"'Dear Death,' I said, with tears, 'why shouldst thou long for me? See! there stands wine for thee. Dear Death, spare me!'

"Smilingly he snatches the glass; smilingly he empties it to the health of his cousin, the Pestilence; smilingly he puts it down again.

"I rejoice at my release, when suddenly he renews his threats: 'Fool,' he says, 'thinkest thou that for thy little glass of wine thou shalt be free?'

"'Death,' I entreat, 'I should gladly be a physician upon earth. Allow me; if thou dost, I promise thee half my patients.'

"'Good!' he exclaims; 'if that is so, thou mayest live. But be devoted to me: live till thou hast kissed to thy heart's content, and art tired of drinking.'

"'Oh, how beautifully sounds this in my ears! Death! thou hast given me new life! This glass, Death, to our good-fellowship!'

"For ever, then, I must live! For, by the god of the vine, for ever love and wine, for ever wine and love, shall delight me!"

He enjoyed the theatre better than ever after his brief absence. The theatre, indeed, now seems to have absorbed his energies. In the morning, his brother says, he was regularly there at rehearsal; in the evening, at the performance. This minute and faithful study of the tech-

[1] S. S. I. p. 76.

nical necessities of the stage not only indicated the strength of his resolve to become a distinguished dramatist, but had an influence of high importance on his future work. It gave him an intuitive feeling of what is possible to performers and what beyond their reach, an intimate knowledge of effects which, although without interest for a reader, powerfully move an audience. He nearly finished a tragedy in which the actor Koch was to have taken the title *rôle;* but that actor suddenly went to Vienna, and as no other member of the company seemed capable of assuming the part, the play was left incomplete.

This was the first of a series of incidents which stripped Leipzig of all charm for Lessing; the next was the removal of Mylius to Berlin. He had attracted attention there by a paper submitted to the Academy of Sciences, which was considered important enough to be printed along with papers by D'Alembert and Bernouilli. Encouraged by the friends this success procured him, he went to the Prussian capital, where he carried on astronomical observations with some of the first scientific men of the day. Lessing could not fail to miss the society of a man with whom he had become so intimate, and who had done so much to stimulate his literary activity. If, however, the theatre had remained to him, the central interest of his life would have been maintained; but this also failed him. For a considerable time the affairs of Frau Neuber had been falling into confusion, and the departure of Koch left her without hope of improving them. His example was followed by other actors; and in the course of the summer of 1748 the theatre was closed and the company dispersed.

The breaking up of the theatre affected Lessing in other ways besides depriving him of his chief occupation and pleasure. With generous thoughtlessness, he had become security for some of the actors for a considerable sum, and they conveniently forgot to remit the amount. Besides,

in spite of his good intentions on leaving Kamenz, he had again run into debt. As his creditors began to make themselves troublesome, he soon perceived that he could not remain much longer in Leipzig. The sudden removal of nearly everything that had given zest to life made him not unwilling to act as prudence directed. The difficulty was, Where should he go? A young man of nineteen, whose chief recommendation is that he has written a play and a number of verses, who has neglected the ordinary studies of the university, whose chosen friends have been men on whom society looks with suspicion, has not usually a very smooth path before him; he can hardly hope to conquer success by the methods of more regular natures. At last it occurred to Lessing to try what luck might befall him in Berlin. Mylius seemed likely to prosper there, and he too might perhaps cut his way to laurels and a fair proportion of thalers. At that time literature cannot be said to have existed as a profession in Germany. At the universities the professors devoted themselves almost wholly to lecturing; and when they wrote, they did so not for the public, but for scholars, and never dreamt of making their writings their chief means of support. Authors who did not profess to belong to the learned class merely played with literature as an amusement of their leisure hours. Of the few who did support themselves by their pen, the majority were men of very deficient culture and wild habits, who took to this calling because they had not self-restraint and perseverance enough for any other. Nevertheless, it was by literature that Lessing now proposed to win his bread. He knew that in France and England poets, dramatists, and critics were able to secure fame and fortune; and he tried to persuade himself that the German people, if appealed to in the right spirit, would not be less generous supporters of high effort than the English or French. In any case, he would be able to remain his own master; and if this mode of life was attended by risks—why, it is an

almost unfailing mark of superior minds to venture something, to explore the unknown if haply it may have treasures to lavish on the fearless which it withholds from those who remain within tried and familiar bounds.

Some time in July, 1748, Weisse called on Lessing, and was told he had gone out of town for a day or two. In reality, he had left Leipzig with a cousin who was studying at Wittenberg, where he proposed to spend some days, intending to reach Berlin before the end of the month. But an evil chance pursued him. At Wittenberg he became very ill, and was for a considerable time confined to bed. When he recovered, Mylius had returned to Leipzig, not having succeeded as he had hoped in Berlin. It was, therefore, impossible for Lessing to carry out his plan, as without introductions or money the obstacles in his way would be insuperable. Nothing remained for him but to continue where he was, and he wrote for his father's permission to study at the Wittenberg university. The pastor had been shocked by the new proof of his son's instability, but was glad to sanction his stay in a town in the midst of whose sobriety and decorum he would be removed from the temptations of the too lively Leipzig.

In the letter to his mother which has been repeatedly referred to, Lessing declares that he was never more unhappy than in Wittenberg. Deprived of all the excitements that had made existence delightful, he had seen his schemes for the future rudely shattered, and was compelled to enter upon a round of dull and profitless duty. Moreover, he had troubles which he declines to explain to his mother, and which were probably renewed persecutions on the part of his Leipzig creditors. The position became intolerable; and when at last, in November, 1748, he heard that Mylius was again in Berlin, editing the "Rüdiger Gazette"—afterwards the "Voss Gazette"—he determined to sweep aside all scruples and boldly assert his freedom. The letter to his mother is dated Berlin, January 20, 1749; and as he had already exchanged several letters with his

parents from that city, he must have been there for some time. Thus early—at the age of twenty—did Lessing, having flung aside the traditions in which he was trained, confront the world, and begin to grapple with it for his own ends and in his own way.

CHAPTER IV.

BERLIN.

I.

At the time of Lessing's arrival in Berlin, it was a much pleasanter place to live in than it had been ten years before. Then the harsh and narrow-minded, although honest, Frederick William I. was on the Prussian throne, and he very effectually destroyed in his capital every trace of intellectual life. It is true it had never been a centre of thought and learning. Frederick I. had founded the Academy of Sciences; but an Academy, if it is to communicate a healthy and enduring impulse, must have behind it the sympathy of an instructed class, and no such class existed either in Berlin or elsewhere throughout the kingdom. Even this small star, however, was obscured by dismal fogs during the reign of Frederick William I. He had a hearty contempt for culture, and could think of no better use for the President of the Academy than to make him the butt of practical jokes of incredible coarseness. A well-drilled soldier was in his esteem the loftiest type of man; and far below this ideal came the ordinary citizen, who, if at stated intervals he could listen to his Lutheran pastor, enjoy a pipe, and consume a proper quantity of beer, was expected to think himself an exceedingly fortunate person. Life at Berlin in those days must indeed have been a dreary affair; and it was made all the more wretched by a political system which, so far as men's relations to the Government were concerned, crushed within them the very germs of dignity and self-respect.

In the political system Frederick II. made no change. He was as absolute a king as ever reigned, and would have opposed to the uttermost any movement in favour of popular rights. But he was not a mere soldier. In spite of occasional lapses into the brutality of his father, he believed in the graces and amenities of life as well as in its stern duties, and would have preferred refined and manly to vulgar and cringing subjects. He restored the Academy of Sciences, enriched Berlin with works of art, patronised to some extent the opera and the French play, and laid the foundations of that school system which has since given Prussia its high rank among the educated nations of the world. Even apart from these definite acts, his personal example would have wrought a profound change in the character of Berlin. The inhabitants were proud of him as already one of the greatest captains in Europe; and his ceaseless activity, his devotion to what he considered to be the highest interests of the kingdom, sent through the wastes whose natural barrenness his father had still further blighted a stream of fresh and fertilising influences.

The direction he sought to give to literary sympathies was wholly French. He hardly knew German as a cultivated language, and so frankly despised the literature of his country that he would not allow a German book into his library. French was the speech he habitually used both in talking and writing. He was familiar with French philosophy and poetry, and communicated on friendly terms with all the best French men of letters. A number of French writers—one of them, Maupertuis, notwithstanding his solemn vanity, a man of real distinction—had settled at his court; and in less than two years after Lessing came to Berlin, Voltaire arrived on his famous visit to the philosophical sovereign whom he was to find so much less agreeable at hand than at a distance. Berlin was thus a sort of satellite to Paris, feebly reflecting its splendour. No literary canon announced on the banks of the Seine was

seriously disputed on the Spree; and any drama, history, or scientific discovery that excited the admiration of the Parisians was sure to awaken enthusiasm in the breasts of the Berliners. In religion, as in everything else, the supreme law came from France. The "Encyclopædia" was not yet written, but the first volume was preparing, and already the conclusions to which it was to give scientific shape had deeply agitated society. The fashionable and educated circles of the Prussian capital caught the sceptical tone of the French without a full appreciation of the grounds which underlay the opposition of men like Diderot and Voltaire to "the Infamous." It became the correct thing to sneer at priests and hoot Christianity as an effete superstition. Frederick was of this way of thinking, and it was, of course, not for the enlightened among his subjects to remain behind their King.

Notwithstanding the predominance of French influence, there was in Berlin a small circle of German writers who gradually acquired more and more importance. The theologian Spalding had made himself known as a translator of Shaftesbury,; and Sulzer was an effective representative of the ideas of the Swiss critics, Bodmer and Breitinger. Ramler, who had finally settled in Berlin in 1748 as professor at a military college, acquired some distinction as a writer of odes; and he was ultimately famous as the chief apostle in Germany of the critical doctrines of Batteux. Stationed with his regiment at Potsdam was Kleist, the author of the poem on "Spring" in Thomson's manner. Here he had been for some time associated with Gleim, who had also resided occasionally in Berlin. Gleim was now comfortably settled as secretary to the Chapter at Halberstadt, but he maintained constant intercourse with Kleist and his Berlin friends. All of them were united in passionate admiration of Frederick, although they could not but admit that he was somewhat too neglectful of the literature of his country.

II.

Lessing was at this time nearly three years in Berlin, and during the whole of that period he lived with Mylius, who welcomed him to the city in which both hoped to win fame and fortune. For a while the young adventurer suffered all the hardships that may be expected by those who are bold enough to break loose from the rules that govern ordinary mortals. Except Mylius, he had not at first a single friend in Berlin; and when he arrived, he was so poorly clad that he could not present himself to persons who might have been persuaded to help him. He had, however, youth and hope, and lost no time in trying to wring from hard fate at least food and clothing. He communicated with the directors of theatres in various parts of Germany, and when this source of aid appeared rather unprofitable, he accepted a humble employment found for him by his comrade. This was the task of arranging the large library of Herr Rüdiger, whose newspaper Mylius edited. In return, Lessing received "free table" and some slight acknowledgment in money.

By a curious chance he was for some time in the service of Voltaire. Among others, he made the acquaintance of a young Frenchman, Richier de Louvain, who supported himself by teaching French, but who ultimately became Voltaire's secretary. During the famous or infamous Hirsch trial Voltaire wanted some one to translate into German a number of French documents written by himself, and for this petty duty De Louvain recommended his friend, who was forthwith presented to the great man in his chambers at the palace. Like all the world, Lessing then profoundly revered the most illustrious French writer of the age, and was undoubtedly pleased to be brought into relations, however remote, with him.

Another relation which seems to have been of some advantage to Lessing was that with a Herr von der Golz, whom he served as secretary, or in some similar

capacity, and with whom he probably lived for a short time on his estates in Poland. This nobleman, who was an acquaintance of Mylius, particularly liked the manly and brilliant young man of letters, and introduced him to a number of friends, from whom Lessing—not, apparently, with much result—expected considerable help.

As the most profitable form of work for an unknown writer, and work which he could take up at times when his energies were not fresh enough for original effort, he occupied himself a good deal with translation. About this time two letters by the King on Crebillon's "Catilina" had been made public. They attracted much notice, and it occurred to Lessing that a translation of the tragedy—accompanied probably by a translation of the King's criticisms, with an answer by the dramatist himself—would be generally welcome. He, therefore, began to render the work into German, and would have written to Crebillon, but for some reason or other the enterprise was abandoned. He completed, however, a much more important undertaking: the translation of two volumes of Rollin's "History." In order to widen his range as a translator, and to enrich his own culture, he learned Italian and Spanish. The "Novelas Examplares" of Cervantes, and Calderon's "Life a Dream," he set to work upon, but neither was completed.

Before touching upon the labours in which he put forth his whole powers, it will be well to glance at the relation in which he stood at this time to his parents. If they were displeased at his leaving Leipzig, they were shocked when they heard that he had departed from Wittenberg and plunged into the great world. It was bad enough that he had disappointed their hopes as to his career; but that he had gone to Berlin, a city full of danger both for his theological principles and moral habits, and that his chosen friend in this seat of infidelity was still the sceptic Mylius, stirred within them anger and fear. They not only, in their first indignation, refused to help him, but peremptorily ordered him to come home. Above all, they stormed at

the evil influence which from the beginning, they maintained, had led him astray. The unfortunate Mylius was especially obnoxious to the Frau Pastorin, who could not find words vindictive enough to express her dislike of him. The pastor made believe that Lessing had promised during his three months' stay in Kamenz neither to read nor write any more comedies, and lectured him for breaking his word and for having associated so much with actors. He sarcastically hailed the ambitious young writer as "a German Molière," but at the same time pointed out that the papers left at home—consisting chiefly of anakreontic verses, which Lessing had begged to be sent on to him—gave evidence of an unstable mind, that would plan many things but complete little. When Lessing drew as cheerful a picture as possible of his work and schemes, he was flatly told that he had not spoken the truth. After all other means of impressing him had failed, his father wrote to some acquaintances in Berlin, begging them to act as spies on his conduct, and to report anything they might find out.

Lessing met the reproaches of his parents with admirable dignity and calmness. In the letters which have been preserved, he does not once admit that he has acted wrongly; he tacitly assumes that he had a right to decide his own destiny, and that he had decided it in the manner best suited to his powers and aspirations. But his tone is respectful and affectionate, and he expostulates only when he is grossly misunderstood. To prove his desire to meet his parents half way, he expressed himself willing to leave Berlin; and when an effort was made to secure for him a post at the Göttingen university, with whose rector, Mosheim, the Church historian, the pastor corresponded, Lessing showed some eagerness that the arrangement should be concluded. The idea was not given up during the whole of his first residence in Berlin, and he even worked hard at a thesis which was necessary for the appointment. As he acquired confidence in himself, however, and became more sanguine of his prospects as a literary man, he rather

shrank from the scheme. In later life he had an almost comical dislike of professors. Their pedantry and self-sufficiency irritated him, and he had probably already enough of this feeling to make an academic office anything but attractive.

The first of the letters we now possess is that addressed to his mother, dated January 20, 1749, from which one or two extracts have already been given. In this he frankly reveals the whole course of his life from the time he reached Leipzig. He then proceeds:[1]—

"I should long ago have succeeded if I had been able to make a better appearance as regards clothing. This is too necessary in a town where, in forming an opinion of a man, people chiefly trust their eyes. It is now nearly a year since you had the kindness to promise me a new suit. You may judge from this whether my last request was inconsiderate. You refuse it on the pretext that I have come to Berlin to please I know not whom. I will not doubt that my allowance [from the Kamenz magistrates] will go on, at least till Easter; and I believe that with it my chief debts may be paid. But I see clearly that your hostile opinion of a man [Mylius] who, if he had never before shown me kindness, has done so now, exactly when it is most needed, is the principal reason why you are so much opposed to all my undertakings. It seems as if you considered him the horror of all the world. Does not this hatred go too far? My comfort is that in Berlin there are a number of honourable and distinguished persons who think quite as highly of him as I do. But you shall see that I am not bound to him. So soon as I receive from you an answer in which you again say what I was forced to conclude from your last letter, I will immediately leave Berlin. Home I shall not go. Neither shall I again go to the university, for my debts cannot all be paid with my allowance, and I cannot lay this expense on you. I shall certainly go to Vienna, Hamburg, or

[1] Sämmtliche Schriften, xii. p. 11.

Hanover; but you may be assured that wherever I am I shall always write, and never forget the favours I have so long enjoyed from you. In each of these three places I shall find very good acquaintances and friends. If I learn nothing else in my wanderings, I shall at least learn how to adapt myself to the world. That will be benefit enough! I shall perhaps in the end come to some place where they will be able to make use of a stopgap like me. If there is anything I may ask, it is this: that you will believe that I have at all times loved my parents as myself."

The next letter, addressed to his father (April 11, 1749), contains a serious protest against the charge that what he had written of his doings was false.[1] "I earnestly beg you to put yourself for a moment in my place, and reflect how such unfounded charges must pain one: charges whose falseness, if you but knew me a little, would be at once apparent to you." In answer to the accusation that he only knows actors, he says his father has quite a mistaken idea of the nature of his intercourse with them. "I have written to Baron Seiller, in Vienna, the director of all the theatres in Austria, a man whose acquaintance is no disgrace to me, and who in time may be of use to me. I have written to similar, or at least to equally clever persons in Danzig and Hanover; and I do not think it can be wrong to be known in other places besides Kamenz." He will not admit that it is only actors who know him. "If they know me, all must know me who have seen my work represented by them. But I could show you letters, for example, from Copenhagen, which were not written by actors, and which prove that my correspondence does not relate solely to the theatre. And it is a pleasure to me to extend it daily. I shall soon write to Paris, to M. Crebillon, when my translation of his 'Catilina' is finished." He here makes the most, as the pastor was probably quick enough to suspect, of the relations he had formed;

[1] S. S. xii. p. 13.

but there can be no doubt that his ardent and energetic nature had already produced an impression on many minds of various type and culture.

On April 28 he replies to a letter from his father more friendly in tone than those he had before received, and thus answers the gibe as to "a German Molière:"[1] "If I could justly claim the title of a German Molière, I should certainly be assured of an immortal name. To confess the truth, I have a strong wish to deserve it, but his greatness and my weakness are two things which may cause the strongest wish to be disappointed. Seneca gives the advice, *Omnem operam impende ut te aliqua dote notabilem facias.* It is very difficult to make ourselves notable in a department in which many have already excelled. Have I, then, done so very ill in choosing for the work of my youth a department in which very few of my countrymen have yet exercised their energies? And would it not be foolish to stop before one has read masterpieces by me? I cannot comprehend why a writer of comedies should not also be a Christian. A writer of comedies is a man who depicts vice in its ridiculous aspects. May not a Christian laugh at vice? What if I promised to write a comedy which the theologians would not only read but praise? Would you think it impossible to fulfil the promise? What if I wrote a comedy on the freethinkers, and those who despise your office?"

Meanwhile, the pastor, apparently impressed by the mingled firmness and gentleness of his son, had sent him nine thalers and a box containing some things he had left at home. A letter dated May 30 contains the expression of Lessing's thanks for the latter favour.[2] "I have received the box with the things specified. I thank you for this great proof of your kindness, and I should say much more if I did not unfortunately see too clearly from your letters that you have for some time been accustomed to think of me everything that is lowest, most shameful, and

[1] S. S. xii. p. 17. [2] S. S. xii. p. 18.

most godless. The thanks of a man of whom you have these prejudiced opinions cannot be other than unpleasant to you. But what can I do in the matter? Shall I copiously excuse myself? Shall I rage at my calumniators, and in revenge disclose their weaknesses? Shall I call my conscience, shall I call God to witness? It would be necessary to have less morality in my actions than I really have to let myself be so far misled. But time will judge. Time will show whether I have respect for my parents, conviction in my religion, and morality in my mode of life. Time will judge which is the better Christian—he who recalls and talks of the principles of the Christian religion, often without understanding them, goes to church, and attends to all the ceremonies because they are usual, or he who has once cautiously doubted, and by the path of investigation has attained conviction, or at any rate strives to attain it. The Christian religion is not something which a man can accept on the word of his parents. Most people, indeed, inherit it like their fortune; but they show by their conduct what sort of Christians they are. Whilst I see that the principal command of Christianity, to love one's enemies, is disregarded, I shall doubt whether those who give themselves out as Christians deserve that name."

In this letter—apparently hopeful that the pastor might be persuaded, if free from feminine influence—he writes a few sentences in Latin protesting against the injustice done to Mylius. There is something highly comic in his anxious protestations that he has the deepest reverence for his mother, but that really she is here quite wrong, and that his father—"Sed virum te sapientem scio, justum æquumque"—ought not to let himself be misled by her. "Cave, ne de muliebri odio nimium participes." It is to be hoped the pastor had the self-restraint not to gratify the lady's curiosity as to the drift of all this Latin.

There are no more letters until November 2, 1750, when it is clear that, if his parents have not absolutely recon-

ciled themselves to the inevitable, they have at least ceased to make wild and cruel accusations. Lessing writes to his father of his plans with some confidence, retails gossip that he thinks may be interesting, and offers to send journals which cost him nothing, if the pastor cares to pay the postage. This is how he refers to the proposed settlement at Göttingen: "You do me injustice if you think I have already changed my opinion again about Göttingen. I assure you once more that I should depart to-morrow, if it were possible; not because I am now unpleasantly situated in Berlin, but because I have given you my promise. For indeed I have great hope that my luck here will soon change. Hitherto I have in vain hoped for this, but I must confess that some failings on my part have perhaps had something to do with my disappointment."

It is easy to see that he had many hardships to endure, but he refers to them in a tone of cheerful courage. "I have so arranged my affairs," he says, "that I can live comfortably this winter in Berlin. With me comfort means what another would perhaps call bare necessity. But if I live, what does it matter whether I live in fulness or not?" Farther on he assures his father that food causes him no anxiety, as for one groschen six pfennige (about 1½d.), he can "dine heartily."

The last letter preserved from this time, also to his father (February 8, 1751), thus disposes of the rival claims of Göttingen and Berlin:[1] "It is true that there is a crowd of scholars in Berlin, and that among these the French have always the preference; but I imagine that Göttingen has no lack of scholars, and that there also a man like me has to push forward from a great multitude if he wishes to be known. I do not think, therefore, that it would be prudent to change one great town for another where, as an unknown person, I should have to overcome a number of obstacles which I have here partly overcome already. The little I should have to hope for in Göttingen cannot decide

[1] S. S. xii. p. 21.

the question, for here in Berlin I can make in the course of the year at least twice as much. If you think I could do the same in Göttingen, you are mistaken; for it depends upon various persons, from whom I should be too far removed for them to be interested in my work. Before I could find similar persons in Göttingen, all the troubles would overwhelm me that have often brought me here to despair. Are the fifty thalers and the free table *quite* certain? I have been too often deceived to trust to mere promises. You are right. God's providence must do what is best in regard to my happiness; but it can do as much for me here as anywhere else. Of this I have convincing proofs, for which I should specially thank Heaven if I thought one should thank Heaven for what is good alone."

III.

There was no German theatre in Berlin to stimulate Lessing's energies, but as the desire for distinction as a dramatist was a deep-seated impulse, no outward stimulus was needed to induce him to work the vein opened at Leipzig. He began many plays, and in 1749 finished two of the most important of his early efforts, "The Jews" and "The Freethinker."

The first of these is what would now be called a play with a purpose. Even in our time the prejudice against the Jews can hardly be said to have died out; but in the middle of last century, at any rate in Germany, it was almost as rampant as in the Dark Ages. Confined in the great towns to their own quarters, they were treated as outcasts who scarce had human rights. Frederick himself, the most philosophic of sovereigns, forgot all about his philosophy in dealing with them. At Berlin every Jew who passed through the Brandenburg gate paid toll, as if his person was a piece of merchandise; and the meanest scoundrel who called himself a Christian thought he was entitled to insult one of the despised race. There is nothing in history more strange than the persecutions of which the Jews have

been the victims. A people whose origin is lost in the most remote antiquity, who had behind them a great past when Zeus and Apollo were still the gods of a young nation, whose career to our own time has been one long romance, whose traditions have been interwoven with the inmost life of Europe, out of the midst of whose religion sprang the faith that has dominated modern civilisation: this people, with a vitality so astounding, qualities so distinct and rare, might surely have been expected rather to fascinate than to repel mankind. The treatment they have received is all the more amazing when we reflect that, in spite of every kind of bitter injustice, they have never ceased to produce men of lofty intelligence, and character rendered sublime by patience and charity. Fortunately, notwithstanding the general intolerance, there have rarely been wanting since the dawn of the modern age a few who have resented the general wrongdoing, and to them it is due that a more enlightened spirit now prevails. To this select class Lessing belonged. As we shall see, his most intimate friend was a Jew; and it was a Jew he selected as the hero of the most impressive of his dramatic works—"Nathan the Wise." Even at this early period he had formed the resolution to do everything in his power to oppose the common feeling, and in "The Jews" ("Die Juden") he struck his first blow.

It might have been supposed that, in accordance with the method of his previous comedies, he would select a particularly absurd representative of the prejudice he wished to assail, and cover him with ridicule. This, however, was not the plan he pursued. The only Christian character of any importance in the comedy is a baron who has no more than the ordinary dislike of the Jews and is otherwise an honourable man. The hero, a rich Jew, is represented as possessing almost every virtue of which human nature is capable. He saves the lives of the baron and his daughter; and the baron, overwhelmed with gratitude, desires to make him his son-in-law. On his

nationality being revealed, this is felt to be impossible, and the two men part with an expression of mutual esteem. So slight a plot could not display more than superficial qualities; and, in any case, the Jew is so plainly drawn to be admired that he fails to touch our sympathies. He is a character in the air, without any quality to connect him with ordinary men. Notwithstanding its dramatic defects, however, the comedy will always have a certain interest on account of the fine sense of justice in which it originated.

"The Freethinker" ("Der Freigeist") was written in accordance with the hint Lessing had thrown out to his father that there might be a comedy of which even he would approve. The hero, Adrast, is a sceptic of a kind Lessing must have frequently met in Berlin. Probably, indeed, Mylius suggested some lines of the picture. He is without serious belief, perfectly self-satisfied, and convinced that all professional upholders of religion are disguised rascals. Theophan, a young clergyman, manly, dignified, and generous, is anxious to remove this silly prejudice, but the more he makes advances the more rudely they are rejected. Time after time opportunities present themselves for serving his enemy, and he never fails, in a spirit of genuine self-sacrifice, to avail himself of them. At last Adrast's resistance is overcome, and he not only acknowledges that Theophan is disinterested and high-minded, but actually begs for his friendship. When the play opens, they are engaged to two sisters, Theophan to Juliane, Adrast to Henriette. Henriette is lively and playful, Juliane thoughtful and serious; nevertheless, Juliane discovers that it is the sceptical man of the world she really loves; Henriette, that she has given her heart to the theologian. The two men also find they have made a mistake; and as the action concludes, love is allowed to have its way. Theophan and Adrast have each a servant who presents a vulgar copy of the principles and tendencies of his master; and Lisette, the maid of the two young ladies,

plays the usual *rôle* in conducting the intrigue which leads to the final issue.

The idea of the plot is partly taken from a play by De L'isle; and in the attention paid to the unities, as well as in the artificial balancing of the characters, the method is still altogether French. It must also be said that there is no single conception of so much vigour as that of the pedantic Damon. The comedy is, however, a decided advance on its predecessors, for the artist is at once richer in materials and better able to control them. If there is no instance of original portraiture, the main conceptions are clearly outlined, and their development is effected by simple and natural means.

"The Treasure" ("Der Schatz"), which belongs to 1750, must have been conceived and written in haste, for it is quite unworthy of such a work as "The Freethinker." It is more on a level with "Damon," the earliest of all his attempts. Incomparably higher is the fragment "Henzi," comprising the first and part of the second act of a tragedy in rhymed Alexandrines. The hero was a citizen of Bern who had recently been put to death—unjustly, it would seem—as a rebel by the authorities of that canton. The wisdom of dramatising contemporary events may be questioned, for men and things near us lack a certain ideal charm with which remoteness invests them; and in the treatment of our own time we require a strict fidelity to particular facts which is not favourable to poetic effect. It was probably a consciousness of this which induced Lessing to break off in the midst of his work. So far as he went, he triumphed much more than could have been anticipated over the obstacles he had to contend against; and had he proceeded, notwithstanding the somewhat grotesque effect of rhymed Alexandrines in German, "Henzi" would almost certainly have stood forth as a truly heroic representative of freedom in the modern sense. What gives a special interest to this fragment is the Shakespearian influence to be detected in it. In 1749 a translation of "Julius Cæsar,"

by Herr von Borgk, who had been Prussian Ambassador at the Court of St. James's, and was one of the few men of rank in Berlin who troubled themselves about literature in Germany, had for the first time introduced the German public directly to the English poet; and this rendering was read by Lessing, to whom it dimly suggested ideas of which he was ultimately to have a wide and clear vision. The character of Henzi was obviously designed to correspond to that of Brutus. Still more decided are the traces of "Julius Cæsar" in "Liberated Rome" ("Das befreyte Rom"), a sketch in which space is left for those incidental appearances of the mob so skilfully introduced by Shakespeare in his historical dramas, and for which Lessing would have looked in vain in French dramatic literature.

A clever fragment, entitled "Women are Women" ("Weiber sind Weiber"), is in imitation of the "Stichus" of Plautus. It portrays a crusty old father who denounces his two daughters for not giving up husbands who have deserted them, and for declining to marry suitors he has provided. The fidelity of the daughters is humorously contrasted with their former detestation of their lords; and a comic effect is produced by the father mistaking ferocious scoldings for mild expostulations. "Tarantula" contains the opening scenes of a rather wild burlesque of a popular writer of "the words" of operas. The broad fun of this piece would have secured for it some success, but Lessing did not complete a task which he probably concluded was hardly worthy of him. In "Palaion" he had the boldness to attempt a play in French. His brother represents it as a mere grammatical exercise, but it is far too seriously planned to be regarded in this light; and the fact that he afterwards translated it into German, and intended to finish it in that language, may be considered to dispose of the theory. He was living in a town where French was the fashionable speech, where in polite circles French ideas and French literature were the main subjects of conversation; and he had at least one intimate French friend, Richier de Lou-

vain. It was, therefore, natural that so daring a spirit should try to measure himself with the writers who were perpetually held up as the sole standards of perfection. No one can pretend that he achieved a very great result. But "Palaion" reveals a creditable knowledge of French; and the *laudator temporis acti* who is its hero rails at his age with much force and animation.

IV.

Even thus early Lessing had formed a lofty conception of the function of the drama in a vigorous and many-sided national life. This induced him, within a year of his arrival in Berlin, to undertake in association with Mylius a truly gigantic scheme. It was the publication of what may be called a Quarterly Review devoted to theatrical subjects. The title of the periodical was "Contributions towards the History and Improvement of the Theatre" ("Beyträge zur Historie und Aufnahme des Theaters"). The introductory statement,[1] although signed by "the authors," is evidently — with the exception, perhaps, of some words of praise regarding Gottsched, which may be ascribed to Mylius, Gottsched's ardent disciple—Lessing's work; and it is impossible not to admire the tone of fearless enterprise by which it is pervaded. It is the privilege and glory of youth to be unconscious of difficulties in any task to which it voluntarily devotes itself; and certainly Lessing had no idea of being deterred by obstacles that might have alarmed a more experienced writer. He starts with the assertion that it is in the drama German literature is most deficient, and lays it down as the purpose of the new periodical to elevate the public taste as well as to guide and stimulate dramatic authors. One way in which these ends are to be attained is by the collection and arrangement of all the most authoritative laws bearing on the drama, and by the free criticism, in the light of these laws, of contemporary plays. "Our judgments," he says, "will at all times be without bitterness, without

[1] S. S. iii. p. 7.

prejudice. Contrary to the custom of art critics, we will seek rather for what is beautiful than for what is bad; we will rather praise than blame." Yet they will be careful to avoid giving the impression that "theatrical work is a trifle, a kind of work of which every one is capable." Not content with this programme, in itself sufficiently large, Lessing proposes to bring within reach of the German public specimens of the grandest dramatic efforts in which the human spirit has disclosed itself. The reading world being already tolerably familiar with the French drama, it was unnecessary to do much more than translate contemporary French writers; but the Greek, Latin, English, Spanish, Italian, and Dutch dramas were almost unknown. The chief works in these languages are, therefore, to be rendered, and they are to be critically compared, so that it may be discovered in what respects the ancients and moderns are inferior to each other, and how the moderns stand among themselves. It is noteworthy that a principle is here stated to which Lessing afterwards gave immense prominence, and which, particularly in Berlin, was startlingly novel. "It is certain," he says, "that if in dramatic poetry the German will follow his natural impulses, our stage will resemble rather the English than the French." After hinting that some original works may be included in the programme of the magazine, the sanguine young reformer dwells on the importance of the actor's as well as the dramatist's art. Declamation, he points out, was held in much higher esteem in ancient than in modern times; and he adds that "if at the present time the subject were studied with greater diligence, one would certainly find more orators than lay figures in our pulpits, and those who are often like lunatics rather than apostles there would know how to speak with more moderation and attractiveness." The laws of effective declamation are to be set forth, and at the same time attention will be given to questions connected with the adornment of the stage and the costume of actors.

As if all this were not enough, the "Contributions" are to include sketches of "the rise, the progress, the fall, and the resuscitation of the theatre among all civilised nations; biographical notices of dramatic poets and actors; historical extracts from the most authoritative works on the theatre." All arguments for and against the theatre are to be brought together, beginning with those of the Fathers and coming down to the declarations of modern divines. "It will thus be clearly seen on what grounds the latter appeal to the former; that the considerations urged by the former against the theatre are no longer applicable, and that the latter condemn it from ignorance and pride." A hope is expressed that clerical intolerance may be modified; but this result is not too confidently anticipated, "since many people are accustomed to be most zealous when they are least able to answer objections." The clergy are responsible for the popular prejudice against the theatre and those who write for it; "but the time may perhaps soon come when even the mob will be wiser, and when they will be the only class for whom it will be necessary to wish a more healthy understanding,"—a sentence which proves that, notwithstanding his contempt for Adrast, Lessing could already aim a pretty hard blow at the weak side of the clergy.

It is a little amusing to contrast these vast proposals with the small achievement in which they resulted. Only four numbers appeared, chiefly written by Lessing, and of these the greater part was taken up with Plautus alone. There is no reason to suppose that it was popular neglect which wrecked the tiny bark: it was brought to ruin by the differences of the crew which manned it. Mylius had no literary creed apart from Gottsched, and, therefore, the old French drama seemed to him the last word of mankind on matters theatrical. Lessing was as yet far from having freed himself from French influence; but he intensely disliked Gottsched's superstitious adherence to narrow rules, his formality and coldness, and, as we have seen, had already become aware that England pos-

sessed a dramatic literature more akin than that of France to the German genius. From the beginning, therefore, it was doubtful whether he and Mylius, however good friends they might be, could work together in an undertaking that demanded complete accord on fundamental questions. The gulf between them became wider as they went on, and at last Mylius committed a mistake which, doubtless greatly to his surprise, Lessing declared fatal to the enterprise. He incidentally asserted that not a single good play had ever appeared on the Italian stage. Lessing considered the periodical for ever disgraced by this opinion, and announced that he could no longer have anything to do with it. As he had been the life of the undertaking, it at once came to an end.

The articles on Plautus were to a large extent the fruit of those solitary studies which had given him so much delight at St. Afra's, and prove that he had already advanced far beyond most of his contemporaries in the spirit in which he approached the study of ancient writers. The first number contains a mere statement of the facts known respecting the poet, with a list of his works and of the various editions of Plautus. In the second there is a spirited translation of the "Captivi;" and the third presents all the objections which could be brought against Plautus by a critic of Gottsched's school. These are not drily enumerated. Lessing loved argument, but he loved it as a means of attaining truth: hence all through life he strove to put himself exactly at the standpoint of his opponent, so as to understand precisely what it was he had to answer. In this case he marshalled every possible hostile criticism in a letter nominally addressed to himself by a correspondent; and Gottsched could not have done more justice to his own principles. The reply is contained partly in the third number, partly in the fourth and last; and it is in this response that Lessing gives the first unmistakable promise of his future eminence as a critic. We are now familiar with the doctrine that, in judging the moral tone

of a writer, we ought to judge him solely by the standard of his own time. Practically it is still often neglected, but in theory it is almost as commonplace as it is obviously just. No principle, however, could have been more opposed to the whole mode of thought of the eighteenth century. An ideal ethical code was accepted for all ages, and men of previous generations stood or fell in proportion as they conformed to its rules. In answering the statement that Plautus is frequently loose in his morality, Lessing boldly advances the view we now hold, urging that much which shocks modern ears was perfectly innocent in those of the Romans. "It is," he adds,[1] "the greatest injustice one can do an ancient writer to judge him according to the refined manners of the present day. We must put ourselves thoroughly in the place of his contemporaries if we would not ascribe to him faults from which he is free." Lessing goes farther, and maintains that moderns are not so very superior to the ancients as they suppose in their feeling respecting coarse words and phrases. "I do not know by what right the often constrained facility in blushing and appearing indignant at the mention of certain words and the sight of certain objects can be placed among the virtues. Modesty in this sense often merely disguises vice. I take all the offensive passages which people make so much of against Plautus, and maintain that not one of them is put in such a way as to mislead innocent feeling. They are too rough, and can awaken only disgust. I am very much mistaken if far greater harm is not done by jokes which our fine wits are accustomed to call roguish. Poison which is introduced without our remarking it fails less frequently in its operation than that which one seeks openly to force upon us."

The other objections to Plautus are that his wit often consists of a mere play upon words, and that—in the "Captivi" particularly—he violates the unities of time and place. With respect to the first, Lessing admits that

[1] S. S. iii. p. 120.

playing upon words is a poor sort of wit; but he draws a distinction between what is dramatically appropriate and what would be becoming in a poet if spoken in his own name. He insists that jokes of this description, when put into the mouths of slaves, as Plautus puts them, were strictly true to life. "Is he to blame for hitting off too well those whom he represents? or would he not rather be to blame if he had lent them his wit, and made them say clever things which a Roman was not accustomed to hear from his slaves?" As to the violation of the unities, Lessing acknowledges this to be a real fault, but pleads that it is at least excusable when committed for the sake of larger and more essential effects.

V.

Towards the end of 1750, Mylius quarrelled with Herr Rüdiger, and either resigned or was dismissed from his post as editor. Rüdiger, who had formed a high opinion of Lessing's talents, wished him to succeed his friend; but at that time political journals in Berlin were so utterly trivial, being compelled by a strict censorship to avoid all discussion of public affairs, that Lessing refused, as he explained in one of the letters to his father, to waste his time in so profitless an occupation. Soon afterwards Rüdiger died, and the paper fell into the hands of Herr Voss, his son-in-law, also a bookseller, who changed its name to the "Voss Gazette," the name it still bears. Voss had long been on friendly terms with Lessing, and now begged him, if not to edit the journal, at least to conduct its strictly literary department, which consisted of reviews of new books. This suited his taste, and fitted in with his ordinary pursuits; he therefore accepted the offer, and began his duties in February, 1751. About the same time a project was formed for publishing a monthly supplement to the paper, to be entitled, "The latest from the Realm of Wit" ("Das Neueste aus dem Reiche des Witzes"), and to contain a general view of the progress of European literature. This also was undertaken by Lessing; and from

April to December, 1751, the supplement regularly appeared. Although Lessing did not write absolutely everything either in the supplement or the ordinary literary columns of the "Gazette," he edited both, and all the articles of any value were his work.

These reviews are quite brief, and if Lessing had written nothing else, would of course have passed away with the ephemeral literature of the day; but no one can glance through them without detecting the stamp of a thoroughly individual mind. They are all the result of conscientious work. Lessing evidently read every book submitted to him, and having done so, was rarely content to adopt the common device of filling up space with extracts. After making a short extract on one occasion, he adds, "It would be an insult to our readers if we were to give more specimens. It would seem as if we believed that a man of taste can be satisfied with passages torn from their contexts." On the other hand, he does not fall into the mistake of supposing that in the course of a brief article he can sum up the results of an elaborate treatise and finally judge them. He usually takes one point, places it in a clear light, and, if possible, adds some contribution of his own to its proper understanding. Compressed as the discussions necessarily are, they display not only wide reading, but a maturity of thought which is usually expected only from much older men. He might have been excused if in his case maturity of thought had implied a somewhat heavy style, for the idea of style had as yet hardly dawned upon German writers. Their 'sentences were involved, dull, and confused'; and it would have been in the ordinary course of things if, at starting, Lessing had been in this respect little better than his neighbours. But already in these early papers we find the aptness of phrase, the terseness of expression, the unexpected turn of wit that are characteristic of the prose works with which his name is now chiefly associated. There is also that unmistakable firmness of tone which marks his later utterances.

This is as far removed as possible from the self-confidence of a mere sciolist and the exaggeration by which a timid man sometimes keeps up his courage. It is the decided drawing of the artist who has a clear vision, and knows exactly how to reproduce its outlines.

Another and essential characteristic of Lessing's style which meets us even at this stage is his love of metaphors and similes. This quality is found to the same degree in no other German author. It is improbable that Lessing's thought was originally, in his own mind, so concrete as it appears in his works; for although a poet, he was not sufficiently a poet, he was too much a pure thinker, to pass from judgment to judgment by means of individual images. Had the imagination and the understanding been thus fused in him, he would have given us less criticism and more poetry. But because he was so consummate a critic, he knew that thought expressed in abstract forms is for the ordinary intelligence powerless, for the educated intelligence without charm. Hence he deliberately clothed his ideas in visible and tangible forms; he brought them, as Sokrates brought philosophy, from the clouds, and made them appear in shapes that the common understanding would apprehend and take delight in apprehending. We find this preference for metaphorical expression in all his writings: dramatic as well as critical, theological as well as æsthetic. He ultimately became a master in its use; and this is unquestionably one of the strongest of the many reasons for the power he still exerts. The objects from which he selects his images are rarely remarkable for grandeur or beauty; he is usually content if they are familiar, precise, and vivid.[1]

The bitter controversy between Bodmer and Gottsched and their followers, which had for a time lost its vehemence, had acquired fresh vigour through the publication

[1] For a minute investigation of the qualities of Lessing's style, see "Forschungen über Lessing's Sprache," by A. Lehmann. The same author has treatises on the styles of Luther and Goethe.

in 1749 of the three first cantos of Klopstock's "Messiah." Without denying that particular passages of this famous epic display genuine imaginative force, most readers now find it utterly without human interest, the style strained, the sentiment unreal. At the time of their publication, however, the early cantos created an incredible hubbub. The author was hailed as the equal, if not the superior, of Milton; and Germans held up their heads, for now at last, it was believed, they had something in literature which even the French could not excel. Bodmer and his friends were especially enthusiastic, for they had taught that the more wonderful the mere theme, the greater must be the work which treats of it; and what could be more wonderful than the tale of the incarnation? Klopstock was invited to Zürich, and received the homage of the veteran, who immediately began an epic in the style of his distinguished disciple. Others followed suit, and by-and-by epics and odes according to the method of the new poet became the order of the day, the humblest versifier looking upon all personages beneath the dignity of a seraph as unworthy of notice. It is not impossible that if the Swiss School had been less noisy in its praise, Gottsched would have deigned to extend some encouragement to Klopstock; for although the latter was far from keeping to the trim garden walks to which the Leipzig professor would have confined poets, he had classical culture, and might have been induced to school his genius into a more decorous and orderly mode of comporting itself. The same things could not, however, be admired at Leipzig and Zürich; and thus Klopstock was as heartily abused by Gottsched and those who still followed his lead as he was adored by Bodmer and the Bodmerites. The dispute between the two parties was renewed with all the old ferocity; but now it was the more deadly because each side had a battle-cry, and the war that had formerly raged respecting principles related to a particular work by which these principles were brought to a definite issue.

Lessing heartily agreed with the Swiss School in its estimate of Gottsched. Moved as he was by the impulses of a deep and expanding life, familiar with the masterpieces of genius in many languages, he could not but feel repugnance to one who made it his business to force the energies of minds of all classes into a narrow mould; and there was nothing in the personal character of the professor to soften the opposition to his literary creed. "The other part," says Lessing, in reviewing an edition of Gottsched's poems;[1] "is mostly new, and adorned by the same arrangement according to rank that gives the first so distinguished an air. In the first book are all the poems to crowned heads and princely personages; in the second, those addressed to counts, noble people, and others who to some extent resemble these; the friendly lyrics are in the third book." Of an ode to Leibnitz in this collection he says: "The greatest part of it is taken up with the praise of the city of Leipzig. That is Pindaric! When this sublime singer had to celebrate the praises of an Olympic victor, of whom he had nothing in God's world more wonderful to say than that he had swift feet or strong fists, it happened now and then that, instead of praising the man himself, he praised his native town. Who can remain serious when Herr Professor Gottsched bases his praise of the philosopher upon the discovery of such trifles as his Binary Arithmetic, to discover which he did not need to be Leibnitz? But the Binary Arithmetic is, perhaps, for the Herr Professor as unintelligible a thing as the *Analysis infinitorum* seems to be, which he, with much insight, calls arithmetic *in* the infinitely little." Gottsched's judgment of the "Messiah" he thus dismisses: "We shall leave it alone in a book in which it will make an impression only on those who are punished enough by not understanding this great poem. Admit that it has some faults, still it remains a piece in virtue of which our Fatherland may boast of the honour of possessing creative minds." The review concludes with

[1] S. S. iii. p. 152.

the brusque sarcasm: "These poems cost two thalers four groschen. With two thalers one pays for what is ridiculous, with four groschen for what is useful."

But while Lessing attacked Gottsched, he did not make common cause with the Swiss writers. He saw that they were as one-sided as their enemy, and, with the independence which was ever afterwards to distinguish him, took up a position outside both parties. The sentences just quoted show that he had been impressed by the "Messiah;" and he elsewhere says that in criticising Klopstock he does so as strategists criticise Hannibal for not besieging Rome. A less great general would not be condemned for not doing this; and faults would be forgiven in poor or mediocre poets which seriously offend readers of a poet like Klopstock. At the same time, when five cantos are before him, he points out that it is impossible to form a judgment of the writer's art, since art can be estimated from the study only of a whole, not of parts: a principle by which the "Messiah" was implicitly condemned; for as years passed on, it became more and more clear that Klopstock had no harmonious whole in his mind, and that in manhood he had little impulse to complete the haphazard beginnings of his youth. Taking the opening lines of the poem, Lessing proves, by a minute examination of line after line, that he fails to sketch a definite plan, and convicts him of vagueness and tautology. In a little notice of the "Ode to God," he hits all the worst blots in Klopstock's compositions of this class. "The poet laments, in this ode, the loss or removal of one beloved. He appears to love his maid as one seraph loves another, and only such love could be noble enough to justify one in speaking to God about it. The whole ode is pervaded by a sublime tenderness which, because it is too sublime, may perhaps leave most readers cold. Besides, one will occasionally remark a meaningless play of ideas, various tautologies, and commonplaces splendidly expressed." After quoting three stanzas full of passionate entreaty, Lessing drily

adds: "What audacity to pray so earnestly for a woman!"[1]

If Klopstock came off thus badly, it may be supposed that his imitators would not be very gently treated. To them Lessing shows no mercy. He declares that even Gottsched would have had his hearty approval if, "instead of condemning the 'Messiah,' he had attacked those stiff witlings who make themselves ridiculous by their unhappy imitations of Klopstock's sublime style." "There are only too many," he adds, "who fancy that a limping heroic measure, some Latin constructions, the avoidance of rhyme, suffice to distinguish them from the crowd of poets. Knowing nothing of that spirit which raises the kindled imagination above these trifles to the great beauties of perception and feeling, they take darkness for sublimity, confusion for novelty, what is romantic for pathos. Can anything be more ridiculous than when one in a love-song speaks with his betrothed about seraphs, and another in an epic describes pretty girls, the description of whom would scarcely be justified in the humblest pastoral? Yet these gentlemen find admirers; and to be called great poets, they have nothing to do but to enter into relation with certain wits who undertake to give the tone in everything that is beautiful. By the copious praises they lavish upon the 'Messiah' in a manner which indicates that they do not feel its real beauties, they cause in the minds of those who do not sufficiently know this great poem a kind of prejudice against it. Very few of them understand the sublime, and therefore everything they do not understand they consider sublime. Everything beyond their range of vision is for them equally high."[2]

Elsewhere we find the following striking sentences:— "When a bold spirit, full of confidence in its own strength, pushes by a new entrance into the temple of taste, hundreds of imitators come behind him in the hope of stealing in through this opening. But in vain: with the same

[1] S. S. iii. p. 194. [2] S. S. iii. p. 212.

strength with which he forces open the door he closes it behind him. His astonished followers see themselves shut out, and the immortality of which they dreamed is suddenly changed into derisive laughter."[1]

Bodmer himself, doubtless to his great surprise, was among the imitators of Klopstock who were made uneasy by this vigorous critic. A brief notice of his "Jacob and Joseph" concludes with the words:[2] "A certain critic has advised that only those works which deserve to be read in foreign lands should be printed in the Roman character. In the case of 'Jacob and Joseph,' they might safely have retained the Gothic character."

Lessing by no means confines himself to the work of Klopstock and the variety of opinion and effort to which it gave rise. All sorts of books, historical, theological, critical, come before him; and on nearly all he has something to say that is still worth reading. Even friendship does not lead him to modify his tone of strict impartiality. Naumann, with whom he had been on intimate terms in Leipzig, and with whom he remained on such intimate terms that for some time they lived together during Lessing's second residence in Berlin, had published some of those ambitious poetic attempts which he used to inflict so readily on all who would listen. One of these was an epic entitled "Nimrod," in twenty-four books. Lessing treats this production with good-humoured banter. "The poet," he says,[3] "has given free scope to his wit, and not troubled himself with rhyme, but chosen hexameters without feet; to which, however, he is not so exclusively attached that he does not often allow octameters and pentameters to slip in among them."

A good many French books are discussed; and in the case of several he complains of the lax moral tone of the writers. "By what fate," he asks, "does it happen that one has to accuse almost all the clever writers of France on this score? Which of them has not written some-

[1] S. S. iii. p. 213. [2] S. S. iii. p. 222. [3] S. S. iii. p. 255.

thing he must be ashamed of before the virtuous? From the great Corneille down to a Piron, all have degraded their wit."

By far the most important French book he had to review was the famous "Discourse" in which Rousseau upheld the paradox that civilisation is an unmitigated evil, and by which he opened a career full of significance for the destiny of France and of Europe. Lessing speaks of the eloquent advocate of natural virtues with the utmost respect, analysing with more than usual care and fulness the leading doctrines of the treatise. In these days, when the primitive man is so much more truly understood than he could be in Rousseau's time, it would not be worth while to argue seriously with one who thought we should prefer savage to civilised life; and even Rousseau was perhaps hardly in earnest. Lessing, however, by a few rapid strokes indicates what he considers the most effective reply to the fallacy as Rousseau puts it.[1] He admits that the decay of nations has often accompanied the highest development of art and science; but he maintains that the two things do not stand to each other in the relation of cause and effect. "Everything in the world has its epoch. A State grows till it reaches this; and whilst it grows the arts and sciences grow with it. If it falls, it does not fall because these overthrow it, but because nothing in the world is capable of incessant growth, and because it has reached the summit from which it must descend with much greater rapidity than it mounted. All great edifices fall in time, whether they are built with art and adornment, or without art and adornment. It is true witty Athens is gone, but did the virtuous Sparta bloom much longer?" Attacking the subject from another side, he asks whether, supposing the arts undermine warlike qualities, that is so great an evil? "Are we, after all, sent into the world to make an end of each other?" Besides, if art and science do sometimes weaken manly virtues, they must

[1] S. S. iii. p. 208.

not be held responsible, for it is the abuse of them that leads to such results.

There was no French writer of the time whom Lessing held in higher esteem than Diderot; and a brief passage shows how well he already understood the nature of the influence which that swift and penetrating thinker was exerting upon his contemporaries. After giving an account of a letter by Diderot on the deaf and dumb, he says:[1] "A short-sighted dogmatist, who dislikes nothing so much as calling in question the learned principles which make up his system, will know how to pick out a number of errors in this writing of M. Diderot's. Our author is one of those philosophers who give themselves more trouble to make than to disperse clouds. Wherever they let their eyes fall, the supports of the most familiar truths shake; and what we imagine we see quite near is lost in an uncertain distance. They conduct us 'through dark paths to the shining throne of truth' (Kleist), while schoolmen, by paths full of fancied light, bring us to the gloomy throne of lies. Admit that such a philosopher ventures to dispute opinions which we have held sacred. The harm is small. His dreams or truths, however they are called, will do society as little harm as those do great harm who seek to bring the thought of all men under the yoke of their own."

It is noteworthy that in none of these reviews does Lessing utter a single disrespectful word respecting Christianity. On the contrary, he expressly praises Klopstock for picturing it in a manner which makes his readers forget its difficulties, and fills them with wonder. "He knows how to awaken in his readers the desire that it were true, provided we were so unfortunate that it was not true." Over and over again, however, he returns to the principle that conduct, not belief, is the important thing, and that mere dogmatic teaching is of no avail if dissociated from practical goodness. "It is fortunate," he

[1] S. S. iii. p. 236.

says,[1] "that here and there a divine still thinks of the practical in Christianity, when the majority lose themselves in fruitless controversies; at one time damn a simple Moravian brother; at another, give a still more simple scoffer at religion new material for scoffing by their so-called refutations; at another, fight about impossible schemes of union before they have laid the foundation for union by the purification of their hearts from bitterness, quarrelling, calumny, oppression, and by the promotion of that love which is the sole essential mark of a Christian. The attempt to put together a single religion before men have been brought to the sincere exercise of their duties is an empty fancy. Are two bad dogs made good by being shut up in a single kennel? It is not agreement in opinion, but agreement in virtuous actions, that makes the world calm and happy."

VI.

Lessing's criticisms were too fresh and original not to attract the attention of the Berlin literary world. "A new critic has risen here," wrote Sulzer to Bodmer on October 15, 1751, "of whose worth you will be able to judge by the accompanying criticism of the 'Messiah.' He appears only a little too young." Somewhat later, Spalding wrote to Gleim: "What do you think of the polite and accurate criticism of the 'Messiah' in the 'Berlin Gazette?'"[2] Lessing had good reason to hope that he would soon rise to a position which would command general respect. Nevertheless, about the close of 1751 he resolved to leave Berlin, at least for a time. His aims were high, and he was conscious that his culture was not yet sufficiently profound to enable him to realise them. A period of quiet study, such as he could not secure in the busy Prussian capital, where there was so much to distract him, was necessary; and besides, as he had no higher title than that of medical student, he thought it

[1] S. S. iii. p. 154. [2] Danzel, p. 210.

would be well to obtain the degree of Master of Arts. During the last days of 1751, therefore, he was on his way to Wittenberg, where his brother Theophilus was then studying divinity.

We have seen that, by an odd chance, Lessing was brought into slight relation with Voltaire. Still more strangely, immediately after his departure from Berlin, the two men came into rather serious collision. After the Hirsch trial Voltaire went to Potsdam to finish his great work on the age of Louis XIV., and, before Lessing left, it was almost ready for publication. Calling upon his friend Richier de Louvain, Lessing found him engaged in selecting from a number of copies two dozen of the best for presentation to the royal family. On receiving a promise that no one else should see it, the secretary was induced to lend him the first part for a few days, as he naturally felt considerable curiosity respecting a book that had been long looked forward to, and that would not for some little time be before the world. Unfortunately, another friend of Lessing managed to carry off the work, and a lady, who saw it in this friend's possession, reported the fact to Voltaire. The latter was furious, and, sending for De Louvain, overwhelmed him with reproaches, and ordered him at once to bring back the volume. By this time Lessing had left for Wittenberg, and either by accident, or because he thought no great harm could result, he had taken the book with him. Voltaire, on hearing this, gave way to one of those bursts of passion which so curiously contrasted with his principles. There was evidently a conspiracy, he declared, to issue a pirated edition, or to steal a march upon him by the publication of an unwarranted translation. Dictating to De Louvain a letter to Lessing demanding the instant return of the stolen property, and compelling him to sign it, Voltaire drove the unfortunate young man from his service. Lessing was amazed to receive so passionate a letter, but soon perceived the real state of the

case. He wrote in French a reply, addressed to De Louvain but really meant for Voltaire, in which he denied that he had the least evil intention in what he had done, and tried to mollify Voltaire by one or two compliments delicately administered. As this answer did not reach Berlin by return of post, Voltaire, confirmed in his suspicions of treachery, himself wrote in an angry tone. Lessing sent a reply in Latin, which, as he afterwards told De Louvain, "Voltaire would hardly post upon his window."

This incident,[1] about which Voltaire made no secret, caused considerable stir in Berlin. "Your affair with Voltairè," wrote Mylius, "has attracted much notice. Since your departure you are better known than when you were here." Afterwards Lessing was the most formidable literary opponent who ever attacked Voltaire, and he occasionally gave somewhat violent expression to his dislike of the Frenchman's personal character. This opposition has been represented as largely owing to the petty quarrel now described, but nothing could be more unjust to Lessing. He was of too great a mould to allow a squabble of this kind, even if he thought himself gravely wronged, permanently to affect his judgment. He conducted a literary warfare against Voltaire solely because there was much in the Frenchman's work of which he disapproved; and if he disliked the brilliant writer personally, that was because Voltaire presented to the world aspects of character which were naturally more offensive to his contemporaries than to us, and as naturally often blinded them to his warm impulses and noble aspirations.

[1] Those who wish full details will find them in Karl Lessing, p. 130. Stahr, who manifests in different parts of his biography a bitter hatred of Voltaire, also relates the incident at great length, giving it an importance it certainly does not possess.

CHAPTER V.

WITTENBERG.

I.

"I LOVE," said Dr. Johnson, "to *browse* in a library."[1] The like might have been said of himself by Lessing. Collections of books had an intense fascination for him; and he had the unfailing mark of the genuine book-lover —a preference for old and rare editions. We have seen that as a boy he liked to pass time by glancing through books; and there is a story told in connection with the portrait of him as a child, that he himself insisted on being painted with "a great pile of books about him." When he was employed to arrange Herr Rüdiger's library, he took care to make himself familiar with its principal works. Indeed, in one of the letters to his father, who had been told that the loss of this occupation had plunged him into serious difficulties, he says, "I never wished to have relations with this old man longer than was necessary for me to become thoroughly acquainted with his library. My end was attained, and we parted." In Wittenberg he had unusual opportunities for his favourite pleasure. An old schoolfellow was employed in the university library, and was able to secure for him the free use of its treasures. He afterwards used to say that he believed this collection did not contain a single book which he had not passed through his hands, so that the greater part of his time must have been spent there.

[1] Quoted in a clever paper on Lessing in Mr. Lowell's collection of essays, "Among my Books."

We must look for the source of this passion partly in his deep love of knowledge for its own sake. In our time, science—using the word in its largest sense—is so divided and subdivided that no one can hope to appropriate more than a small part of it. But last century it was still possible to range over the whole field of knowledge, and accordingly we find in nearly all the leading minds of the age a thirst for something approaching universal information. It was almost equally strong in Diderot and Voltaire, Dr. Johnson and Hume, Kant and Goethe. Lessing shared to the utmost this tendency of the epoch. It was of little consequence that he did not at the moment see how any particular addition to his vast stores could be practically applied; it was enough that there was something to be known, and that he had the means of learning it. Practical use might be left to the chances of the future; or if no practical use ever became possible, then the acquisition itself was valuable. Yet he had none of the mere scholar's superstitious reverence for books. In his later writings he often alludes with impatience to those who consider books the only, or even the chief, mode of communicating intellectual impulse; the direct contact of mind with mind he regarded as the highest of all means of awakening thought. And knowledge acquired from without he looked upon as a positive evil if it hampered the free activity of the intellect. "The wealth of experience derived from books," he writes in one of his fragmentary notes,[1] "is called learning. One's own experience is wisdom. The smallest capital of this latter is worth more than millions of the former."

Like nearly all great writers, and absolutely all great scholars, Lessing had a good memory; his knowledge, therefore, became prodigious. He was especially learned as to the history of literature. On the most unexpected occasions he would reveal an astonishing acquaintance with obscure authors of obscure periods, and there were

[1] Sammtliche Schriften, xi. (2), p. 403.

few opinions in the higher regions of thought of which he could not have given some sketch. He thus knew, when a fresh subject presented itself, where to go for farther information; and if on any of the subjects he made his own a blunder was committed, it was a rare chance if it escaped his notice. Of recent English writers Sir William Hamilton, as a scholar, probably presents the nearest parallel to Lessing. While, however, the Edinburgh professor's learning was in his particular department deeper than Lessing's, it extended over a much less wide range. Besides, Hamilton was often a slave to his learning; Lessing was complete master of his. The former sometimes quotes long lists of authorities, in which no attempt is made to distinguish their relative worth; the latter never gives an authority greater weight than in his deliberate judgment it deserves. The effect of Lessing's vast reading on his style is very marked. It not only gives solidity to his conclusions, but fills his writings with allusions which few readers are learned enough to follow; and it perpetually tempts him to turn into side paths, and pour upon some incidental question a flood of new light. His sense of proportion as an artist prevented him from giving way to this temptation too seriously

II.

Among the books Lessing had reviewed at Berlin was the third part of a lexicon by a well-known scholar, Jöcher. It was devoted to the history of learning, and therefore went over ground on which Lessing was well able to detect its errors. He pointed out several of these, but having again studied the work in Wittenberg, and found out many more mistakes, he resolved to publish an independent criticism. Several sheets were printed, and, for some reason which cannot now be determined, he wrote to the publishers at Leipzig, enclosing what he had completed. He probably intended merely to warn them that they were issuing a work which needed revision; but the typical literary man

of that time was not particular as to the methods he adopted of obtaining money, and the publishers assumed that their correspondent wished them to buy him off. They did not answer his letter, and placed neither it nor the printed sheets before Jöcher. They talked of the incident, however, and by-and-by Lessing's friends at Leipzig learned to their surprise that he had been trying to extort money. As a story of this kind loses all piquancy without details, the sum he had demanded was set down at something between sixty and seventy thalers. Weisse, with affectionate alacrity, hastened to write to him on the subject; and as his reputation had already been unpleasantly affected by the offence he had given Voltaire, he felt somewhat keenly this fresh blow. At last Jöcher himself heard of the matter, and going to his publishers received from them the communication which ought at once to have been forwarded to him. He was an honourable man, and seeing no ground for suspecting unfair dealing wrote to Lessing a respectful letter, expressing regret that he himself had not in the first instance been addressed, and declaring that if he had been, he would willingly have accepted, acknowledged, and paid for any help that might have been rendered him. He offered to refund the amount which had been expended on printing, and to buy such materials as had been collected in manuscript. His only objection to the part printed was that some of its expressions were a little too severe. Lessing's reply must have been in an equally courteous tone, for in a second letter Jöcher addressed him as "his most worthy patron," explained that he had taken advantage of the permission granted him to strike out the phrases he had disliked in the sheets placed at his disposal, and declined Lessing's offer to submit to him the remaining and all future articles in writing, as he was convinced that nothing would be said opposed to the good feeling which ought to exist between authors and learned men. At this point Lessing reconsidered his decision, and gave up the plan altogether. He let Jöcher have

the use of his remarks for supplementary volumes; and in a collection of "Letters" which he by-and-by published, he reprinted, with a brief explanation, the sheets that had given occasion to so much groundless talk.

No one who knows Bayle can look through these articles without recognising that Lessing was deeply indebted to him. He is frequently cited, and the tone pervading the whole is precisely that which gives so distinct a character to the work of the illustrious Frenchman. Even the arrangement of the materials immediately recalls Bayle. Lessing had long been a diligent student of this writer, and at no period of his life did he give up the custom of reading and consulting him. Bayle summed up the results of the vast and untiring research of the seventeenth century, and until the publication of the "Encyclopædia" it was from him that the opponents of existing faiths and institutions in the eighteenth drew their sharpest weapons. But it was never in his mere learning that his fascination consisted. If this had been so, the "Dictionary" would not have been opened after the "Encyclopædia" was given to the world, whereas it is even yet one of the most invigorating and suggestive of the works which have played a great part in the intellectual development of Europe. Its peculiarity is its incessant dialectic. Having shaken himself free from tradition, Bayle brought every opinion and custom to one test: the test of reason. Open him where we may, we find him always engaged in the process of inquiry, reaching certainty through doubt, opposing idea to idea, analysing, distinguishing, striving to reach the last ground of principles, to push them to their remotest issues. Herein lies the explanation of his power over Lessing. The latter saw farther than the former, partly because he came later, partly because he had a greater and finer nature; but the two men were in full accord in their deepest intellectual tendency.[1]

[1] Danzel (pp. 220–225) draws an interesting parallel not only between some mental characteristics of Bayle and Lessing, but between the circumstances of their careers.

III.

For the university of Luther the age of the Reformation had an undying charm. It was the subject of research and speculation chiefly cultivated, and the library was naturally well furnished with works bearing upon it. Lessing, as the effect both of early training and of certain impulses of his own, was also interested in this period. During his residence at Wittenberg, therefore, he occupied himself to a large extent with the literature of the epoch; and none of his contemporaries acquired either so vivid a conception of the leading actors in that great drama, or so thorough an appreciation of the work they half unconsciously achieved. The first fruits of his studies were contained in a series of papers he entitled "Rettungen:" a word which may perhaps best be rendered "Vindications." They are brief—if Lessing had lived now, they would probably have appeared as magazine articles—and they are on themes which, apart from his treatment of them, could hardly stir the curiosity of the most inquisitive. So clear and animated, however, is their style, so fresh their thought, that it seems strange in reading them that their titles should have appeared dry and repellent. By striking some chord of human sympathy, Lessing always knew how to awaken and sustain the interest of his readers.

The object of the papers is to defend certain writers of the time of the Reformation against the misrepresentations of later critics. As in his corrections of Jöcher, so here the influence of Bayle is everywhere manifest. One of the papers—that on Cardan—he distinctly describes as an addition to Bayle's article on the same subject. The very idea of thus constituting himself a champion of wronged authors was probably derived from the "Dictionary," for Bayle was particularly fond of this *rôle*.

The most valuable of the essays is undoubtedly that already named. Cardan was one of the band of Italian thinkers, brilliantly represented by Giordano Bruno, who

in the sixteenth century heralded the approach of the modern scientific movement. In his principal treatise, "De Subtilitate," he ventured to compare what he called, after the fashion of his time, the four chief religions of the world: Christianity, Judaism, Mohammedanism, and Paganism. He stated the grounds on which he supposed each to rest, and concluded with an assertion interpreted to mean that the victory of one or other of these faiths would be decided by chance (*Igitur his arbitrio victoriæ relictis*). As a matter of course, the critics at once raised the cry that he was an atheist. The accusation was first made by Scaliger; and although Cardan afterwards removed the phrase that gave most offence, one writer after another continued to repeat the charge against him. Any one who had in those days the misfortune to be called an atheist was a sort of intellectual Cain: the mark upon his brow was deep and ineffaceable.

In his vindication of Cardan Lessing first translates the whole passage to which objection was taken. He then asks whether, after all, it is a crime to compare Christianity with other religions; and here we have his first decisive assertion of that right of free criticism which he was afterwards to defend with so much splendid power. "What is more necessary than to convince oneself of one's faith, and what is more impossible than conviction without preliminary examination? Let it not be said that the examination of one's own religion is enough; that if one has discovered the marks of divinity in this, it is unnecessary to seek for such marks in other religions also. Let not any one content himself with the simile, that if a man knows the right way he need not trouble himself about wrong paths. We do not learn the latter through the former, but the former through the latter."[1] It is admitted that if, in comparing religions, Cardan does not rightly estimate the evidences in favour of Christianity, he is to be condemned; but Lessing shows that he presents with unusual force all the essential arguments for its divine

[1] S. S. iv. p. 55.

authority. On the other hand, he protests that Cardan is as unfair to other religions as he is scrupulously just to his own. In "De Subtilitate" Christians, Mohammedans, and Pagans are represented as united in urging that Judaism could not have been pleasing to the Deity since it had been permitted to perish; but Lessing retorts that it has not perished. A Jew, he insists, might very well maintain that his people is only undergoing a sort of prolonged Babylonish captivity; that the fact of its having been preserved through so many changing conditions is proof that it has before it an era of fresh triumph. With respect to Islamism, he puts into the mouth of an intelligent Mohammedan the counter-statements by which those of Cardan might be met; and this imaginary speech is one of the most effective illustrations of that sympathetic power which enabled Lessing to contemplate life from the standpoint of the most diverse races. The Mohammedan begins by drawing a highly unfavourable picture of the creeds of his opponents. "That which the Pagan, the Jew, and the Christian calls his religion is a jumble of principles which a healthy understanding would never acknowledge as its own. They all appeal to higher revelations, the possibility of which has not yet been proved. Through these they affect to have received truths which may perhaps be truths in another possible world, but are certainly not truths in ours. They themselves acknowledge this, and hence call them mysteries: a word which carries its refutation with it. I will not name them to you, but will only say that it is they which have created the lowest and most sensuous ideas of everything Divine; that it is they which will not allow the common people to think of their Creator in a worthy manner; that it is they which seduce the mind to unfruitful speculations, and form for it a monster which you call faith. To this you give the keys of heaven and hell; and it is good fortune enough for virtue that you have felt compelled to give it an accidental association with faith. Reverence

for sacred fancies makes man, you suppose, blessed without righteousness; but the latter does not have this effect without the former. What blindness!"[1] On the other hand, there is nothing in Mohammedanism which in the smallest degree contradicts reason. "We believe in one God; we believe in future punishments and rewards, of which each will be measured out to us in accordance with our deeds. This we believe—or rather, that I may not use your unhallowed word, of this we are convinced—and of nothing else. Do you know, therefore, what you have to do if you desire to oppose us? You must prove the insufficiency of our doctrines. You must prove that man is under an obligation to do more than know God, to be more than virtuous; or, at least, that he cannot learn both by reason, which was given to him for the purpose. Do not talk of miracles if you will raise Christianity over us. Mohammed never wished to do things of that kind; and was it necessary he should? He alone needed to work miracles who had to persuade us of unintelligible things, in order to make one unintelligible thing probable by another. No such necessity, however, is imposed upon him who advances nothing but doctrines which carry their touchstone along with them. If one gets up and says, 'I am the Son of God,' it is right we should call to him, 'Do something which only such a one could do.' But when another says, 'There is only one God, and I am His prophet; that is, I am he who feels himself called to vindicate His unity before you who are mistaken about it,' what need has he for miracles? Let not, therefore, the peculiarity of our language, the boldness of our mode of thinking, which wraps up the smallest principles in blinding allegories, mislead you into taking everything literally, and looking upon things as miracles about which we ourselves should be very much surprised if they really were miracles. We gladly make over to you these supernatural —I know not what I shall call them. We make them

[1] S. S. iv. p. 61.

over to you, I say, and thank our teacher that he has not made his good cause suspicious by them." [1]

A less interesting passage follows, justifying the Mohammedans for spreading their faith by the sword, and deriding the notion that the sensuous representations of Paradise are to be taken literally, any more than the biblical statements respecting the heavenly Jerusalem.

It would be a mistake to regard this speech as purely dramatic in intention. It is easy to read between the lines, and to see that the Mohammedan expresses to a large extent Lessing's own convictions. He had already learned that conduct is of higher importance than belief, and that no single religion can claim possession of the whole truth. What extension he was to give to these principles we shall hereafter see.

The passage in which Cardan seems to say that in the battling of the four religions victory will be determined by chance is next discussed; and Lessing endeavours to make out that Cardan is referring, not to the spiritual conflicts of these faiths, but to the opposition in Eastern Europe between Mohammedanism and Christianity, and that it was in this struggle he believed triumph would be decided by the fortune of war.

Of the remaining "Vindications," the least important is that in which he points out that an obscure book of the seventeenth century, "Ineptus Religiosus," charged with containing all sorts of blasphemies, was really satirical and intended for the support of orthodox belief. Very much more interesting is the article on Cochlæus, a Catholic contemporary of Luther, usually described as the controversialist who first traced the Reformation to a mere monkish quarrel. It is shown that this account of the Reformation did not originate with him, but was contained in letters written in 1520 and 1521 by a certain Alphonsus Valdesius. These letters, which are translated, are not without historical value; but it is when they have been

[1] S. S. iv. p. 61.

disposed of that the paper becomes really suggestive. Lessing raises the question: suppose it were true that the Reformation had no more lofty origin than that ascribed to it by Alphonsus Valdesius, would Catholics gain anything by the fact? "Enough," replies Lessing,[1] "that through the Reformation much good has been done, which the Catholics themselves do not wholly deny; enough that we enjoy its fruits; enough that we have to thank Providence for these. What have we to do with the instruments of which God made use? He chooses almost always not the most blameless, but the most convenient. Let the Reformation, then, have had its origin in jealousy: would to God that jealousy always had such happy consequences! The departure of the children of Israel from Egypt was occasioned by manslaughter, and, say what you will, by culpable manslaughter: was it, therefore, less a work of God, less a miracle?" Again: "A recent author expressed the witty idea that in Germany the Reformation was a work of selfishness, in England a work of love, in musical France the work of a street-song. Great pains have been taken to refute this fancy: as if a fancy could be refuted. One cannot refute it except by taking the wit from it, and that is here impossible; it remains witty, whether it is true or not. But to take the poison from it, if it is poisonous, one has only to express it thus: Eternal Wisdom, which knows how to connect everything with its aim, effected the Reformation in Germany through selfishness, in England through love, in France through a song. In this way the fault of man becomes the praise of the Highest."

An article on Simon Lemnius, written at this time, and included in the "Letters" subsequently published, is so completely in the spirit of the "Vindications," that it would properly have formed one of these studies. Lemnius was also a contemporary of Luther, and attacked the reformer in so many verses that it became the fashion among

[1] S. S. iv. p. 102.

Lutherans to consider him an unworthy wretch. Lessing, without justifying his coarse gibes, proves that Luther had himself to blame for having in Lemnius a persistent enemy. The latter, while a resident at Wittenberg, published a collection of Latin poems, in which he praised the Elector of Mainz, not for his religious opinions or policy, but for his just government and his patronage of learning and the arts. Luther was scandalised, and raged so fiercely against the offender that the unlucky poet was compelled to fly to save himself from farther consequences. Thereupon the reformer, who had once affixed to the church door a very different sort of document, placed there a paper in which he denounced "the fugitive knave," and declared that "if he were caught, he would according to all law justly lose his head." In setting forth this incident in its true light, Lessing was far from being moved by a sense of hostility to Luther. There was no historical character for whom he had deeper respect, and whose work he considered more beneficent to humanity. But Lutherans—especially Wittenberg Lutherans—all but worshipped him; his spiritual authority was absolute, and crushed every indication of freedom. Lessing, even at this early age, could not tolerate that any one should dominate thought; and the letters on Lemnius were the means he adopted for convincing his countrymen that in looking on Luther as faultless they simply ignored facts. He explains that he himself felt the necessity of being reminded that, after all, the reformer was human. "I hold Luther in such reverence that I like to discover some small faults in him, because I should otherwise be in danger of idolising him. The traces of humanity which I find in him are to me as precious as the most dazzling of his perfections. They are for me more instructive th[illegible] all these taken together; and I shall consider it a m[illegible] show them to you."[1]

[1] S. S. iii. p. 282.

IV.

Although Lessing wandered freely over all literature, it was classical literature which, during the greater part of his life, formed the centre of his studies. Other subjects were taken up and dropped; for this his enthusiasm not only never abated, but grew as his knowledge became wider and deeper. So steadily did he read the great Latin and Greek writers that they came in a sense to be nearer to him than the authors of his own time. It is here we find the secret of his passion for purity and nobleness of style; and if he ultimately discussed with rare confidence the laws of literary expression, he did so because he relied for his principles mainly on those matchless performances in which for once human effort all but touched its ideal.

As yet he had devoted more attention to Latin than to Greek authors; and while in Wittenberg, the Latin writers he chiefly read were Horace and Martial, in whose cool worldliness he found a refreshing contrast to the heated and stifling atmosphere of theological bigotry that surrounded him. His reading of Martial induced him to spend many leisure hours in the composition of epigrams. Some of them are in Latin, but the majority are in German. Of the latter a considerable number are translations or adaptations from Martial and other epigrammatists; and both these and the epigrams which are strictly original are altogether in the style of Martial. That is, curiosity is excited, and then gratified by some pointed, often unexpected, conclusion; and the idea is forced into the narrowest possible limits, not a word that can be dispensed with admitted even for the sake of rhyme. All through sing occasionally wrote epigrams; but none of high literary merit, and some make as near an tediousness as it is possible to conceive so

brilliant a writer making. Sometimes, too, they bear unpleasant traces of the roughness of the time in which they were produced. In nearly all, his tone is one of biting satire. He is especially hard upon women, of whose virtues and influence upon society in his own day he had certainly not formed a lofty estimate. He represented the world, not as it ought to be, but as he found it; and his clear perception of its defects did not in the least tend to dry up the fountains of his humanity.

CHAPTER VI.

SECOND RESIDENCE IN BERLIN.

I.

TOWARDS the end of 1752, in his twenty-fourth year, Lessing once more entered Berlin. In April he had taken the degree of Master of Arts; and henceforth he was known as Magister instead of as Studiosus Medicinæ. He came to the Prussian capital this time with very different feelings from those with which he first arrived there. His prospects were no longer vague; he knew precisely the sort of life he meant to lead, and was conscious of power to realise his plans. Nor did he come as a stranger, with only one friend to counsel and aid him. Every street of Berlin was familiar to him; and he had many acquaintances, one of whom, the bookseller Voss, was able to be of essential service to a young and aspiring writer.

The three years he now spent in Berlin were among the busiest of his life, but his work was rendered lighter and more pleasant than it had been by the constantly increasing recognition he received, and by as much social intercourse as he chose to enjoy. All the chief literary men of the town, including Sulzer and Ramler, were soon counted among his friends. With the former, who loved to patronise younger men than himself, he never became intimate, but intercourse with the latter he valued very highly. These and many others he often met, not only in society, but at a club which had recently been started—

the Monday Club—of which he became one of the most active members. He also took the lead in a Friday Club, which was confined strictly to a few friends who thoroughly understood each other. To the end of his life he was almost as fond of clubs as Dr. Johnson.

He was very careful not to confine his acquaintance to persons who occupied themselves with literature. The tendency of literary men is to look upon the world as something which exists for no other purpose than to be written about; and it must be said that they are not usually very generous in their appreciation of the labours of rivals. Lessing, who hated narrowness and pettiness, cultivated society, therefore, outside the range of so-called literary circles. He liked especially to associate with officers and actors.

Mylius was still in Berlin at the time of Lessing's arrival, but in a few months they said to each other what proved to be a last farewell. This eccentric philosopher had for some time hesitated whether to devote himself to literary or scientific work. As he achieved some success in the latter and was encouraged by prominent men, he finally decided for science, and as editor of a scientific periodical made his name pretty widely known. His restless nature was ill satisfied with anything having the appearance of settled duty, and it by-and-by occurred to him that it would be a fine thing if he could manage to travel in foreign lands in the interests of science. Curiously enough, a good many people agreed with him, and among them no less a person than Haller. A subscription list was opened, and in a short time a sum was collected large enough to allow him to start for the English colonies in America on a scientific mission. He never reached his destination. Unaccustomed to the rapture of having a tolerably large supply of money, the good Mylius journeyed to Holland by easy stages, missing no pleasure within his reach by the way. Instead of going straight from Holland to America, as had been arranged,

he sailed for London, under the pretence that it was necessary to improve his English and to make various preparations. In London he mingled freely with literary men, published a letter criticising a new play, and translated into German Hogarth's "Analysis of Beauty." Haller, who had interested himself deeply in the enterprise, was startled, even before Mylius left the Continent, by an application for more money; and from England the demands of this kind became formidable. In the end a report reached Germany that this singular apostle of science was seriously ill, and the next tidings were tidings of his death.

Another friend with whom Lessing had associated in Leipzig, Naumann, whose "Nimrod" he had so amusingly criticised, was now in Berlin; and for some time they shared the same rooms. Lessing really liked Naumann, who, although not very clever, was energetic, affectionate, and entertaining. It was fortunate that he did not readily take offence, for Lessing seems to have made a butt of him rather mercilessly. He wrote a book on "The Understanding and Happiness;" and Lessing's remark on receiving a copy was, "My dear fellow, how did you ever come to write about two things you have never had?"

It was during this stay at Berlin that Lessing secured two friends who became far more to him than such men as Mylius and Naumann could ever have been, and whose names were destined to be intimately associated with his own. These friends were Frederick Nicolai and Moses Mendelsshon. The latter, a Jew, and now perhaps best known as the grandfather of the musical composer of his name, became one of the leading popular philosophers of his day; and there was no friend whom Lessing more truly loved. He was of the same age as Lessing, and had come to Berlin young and friendless. At this time he was a clerk in a silk manufactory, and was too modest and retiring to attract much notice. He had, however, the possibilities of high distinction. Of delicate sensibilities,

utterly unworldly in his tastes and aspirations, largely tolerant and sympathetic, and capable of the nearest and most sacred attachments, he was also a man of subtle intellect and an ardent lover of truth. In his leisure hours he had already taught himself Latin, French, and English; he was an accomplished mathematician; and besides studying Leibnitz and Wolf, he was a diligent reader of Locke. He was introduced to Lessing as a proficient at chess, a game of which both were fond. Lessing, who was a keen judge of character, speedily detected beneath the unassuming manner of his new acquaintance signs of a rich inward life, and they were soon fast friends. Every morning between seven and nine, before going to business, Mendelssohn called on Lessing, and in the room of the latter they read together, and discussed those questions which lead back to the last grounds of thought, and which, the more they are seen to be insoluble, become the more fascinating to energetic and penetrating minds. It was Lessing who started Mendelssohn on the career in which he achieved his reputation. Having lent him a book by Shaftesbury, Lessing asked him when he returned it how he had liked it. "Very much," said Mendelssohn; "but I think I could do as well." "Why not do it?" was the reply. Some time after, Mendelssohn put into Lessing's hands a bulky manuscript. To the author's surprise, he by-and-by returned the work—printed. He had been struck by its vigour and freshness, and afraid lest Mendelssohn should object to its being published, he had quietly used his influence to get it laid before the public.

Nicolai, who was a year or two younger, had the misfortune in his old age to put himself in opposition to the rising influences of the new era. He thus called down upon himself the ridicule of Goethe and Schiller and the wrath of Fichte. Whatever he may have been when he had outlived his time, in youth he was fresh and attractive. He was the son of a Berlin bookseller, and learned his father's trade at

Frankfurt-on-the-Oder. There he read every book in the shop in which he served, and turned to the best advantage such opportunities of culture as were offered him by association with university students. He afterwards came to Berlin, where he helped his father, ultimately inheriting the business and giving it a great extension. Indeed, in his hands it became a most potent factor in the development of the literary taste of the age. His favourite study was English literature; and in 1751 he began his work as a writer by publishing anonymously a little book on Milton, which was highly approved by the adherents of the Swiss School. The materials of this first attempt were derived from English sources, but they were presented in a clear and animated style, and his attacks on the narrow judgments of Gottsched and his followers proved that he could think on important subjects for himself. A few years later he wrote a series of letters on the contemporary literature of Germany, in which he derided Bodmer and Gottsched equally, and maintained that their long-continued conflict had ceased to have any deep meaning or interest. These letters were issued by Voss, who was so pleased with them that he gave Lessing the sheets as they were passing through the press. They not only contained some complimentary references to Lessing, but the writer had evidently been profoundly influenced by his opinions and style. He was naturally interested, and sought Nicolai's acquaintance. No one could have been further removed from Mendelssohn's type of character. Nicolai was of a bustling, practical nature, anything but retiring, full of schemes that had a bearing on their originator's pocket as well as on the intellectual progress of Germany. Lessing, however, had sympathies wide enough for both men, and not only became Nicolai's friend but made him Mendelssohn's. The remarkable trio were daily drawn more closely to each other, and their friendship was broken only by death. But while, in the latter part of his life, his affection for Mendelssohn became, if possible, deeper and

warmer, the tendency of his relation to Nicolai was to become somewhat less strong and influential.

II.

Lessing immediately began, as before, to make money by translation. Among other works rendered by him was an English pamphlet on the relations of England and Prussia, some French writings of Frederick II., part of Marigny's "History of the Arabians," and a Spanish book of the sixteenth century by Huarte on "The Examination of Heads," a work in which some of the theories of phrenologists were anticipated. These translations are said by his German biographers to be incomparably better than anything of the kind that had been previously known in Germany.

He also resumed his work as a critic in connection with Voss's newspaper, and that journal soon became closely associated with his name in the mind of the public. The reviews which now appeared are distinguished by the same freshness, clearness, and vigour as those he formerly wrote. One of the first books he had to notice after his return was the "Amalie, ou le Duc de Fois," of Voltaire; and it is interesting to observe, when we remember the cause of offence he believed Voltaire to have given him, and his opposition afterwards to this great writer, how respectful is the tone adopted towards him. Lessing cannot find words emphatic enough to express his admiration of Voltaire's genius, and of this particular manifestation of it. "What moves him, moves; what pleases him, pleases. His happy taste is the taste of the world." These words are taken from some verses written by Lessing on the character of a true poet, and he here applies them to Voltaire. "What a poet!" he continues, "who in his age retains the fire of youth, as in his youth he anticipated the mature criticism of age."[1] Rousseau's "Discours sur l'origine et les fondemens de l'inegalité parmi les

[1] Sämmtliche Schriften, iii. p. 377.

hommes" is also reviewed, and it is treated with the same consideration which had formerly been displayed in the discussion of Rousseau's paradox respecting civilisation. "In all his speculative observations his heart has taken part, and his tone is, therefore, very different from that of a venal sophist whom selfishness or vanity has made a teacher of wisdom."[1]

Two brief reviews of the translation of Hogarth's "Analysis of Beauty" by Mylius deserve notice, for they prove that he had already made the principles of art a subject of serious study. He begins the first article by alluding to Hogarth as "unquestionably one of the greatest painters whom England has produced," finding the chief power of his pictures in "a satirical morality which compels the heart to participate in the pleasure of the eyes." He makes no reference to the storm of ridicule excited by "the line of beauty" in this country, but treats Hogarth's whole theory as one of high importance. The book, he thinks, is "almost indispensable" for "the philosopher, the naturalist, the antiquary, the speaker in the pulpit and on the stage, the painter, the sculptor, and the dancer." It provides a firm ground of doctrine for "all who take pleasure in the title of connoisseur, but who in matters relating to art often pronounce undecided and contradictory judgments, so that they make only too plain their want of decisive and clear ideas."[2]

Another noteworthy article of this time is on a German translation, by Curtius, of Aristotle's "Poetics." Already he recognises the imperishable greatness of this work, which, as we shall see, was afterwards to exercise immense influence on his critical judgments. Aristotle, he says, had hardly lost his supremacy in philosophy when it was discovered that he was the chief of critics. "Since then he has ruled in the realm of taste among poets and orators with as unlimited authority as he did among his Peripatetics. His 'Poetics,' or rather the fragment of it, is the

[1] S. S. v. p. 57. [2] S. S. iv. p. 507.

spring from which all the Horaces, the Boileaus, the Hedelins, the Bodmers, even the Gottscheds, have watered their gardens."[1]

The attacks on Gottsched were renewed with increased ardour. Von Schönaich, author of an epic which Lessing had unfavourably reviewed, who was now recognised as Gottsched's lieutenant, and who thought himself bound to overwhelm with abuse all who did not belong to his party, is handled, if possible, with more contempt than his master. He was one of those dull people who mistake hard words for wit, and scarcely deserved the honour of being called to account by a man of genius. Lessing, however, believed that he and his school were doing grave injury to the national taste, and missed no opportunity of making him ridiculous. The correspondence that passed between Gottsched and his disciple shows that they felt keenly the wounds inflicted on them by their formidable enemy, and Von Schönaich retorted by many heavy witticisms at the expense of Gnissel, as he was pleased to call Lessing. The Swiss School were enchanted at the blows dealt from an unexpected quarter at their opponents, and they seem to have had some hope of gaining the brilliant young journalist as one of their leaders. In 1754 Bodmer made inquiries of Sulzer respecting him; and in the following year Wieland, then residing at Zürich, and believing that all criticism was summed up in Bodmer's literary creed, and all poetical excellence in the "Messiah," wrote to Gleim: "It would, in my opinion, be not bad if this man, who has his good parts, could be won for the good cause, for he has all the qualities of a champion."[2] Lessing had given proof that he sided with neither party, but as, of the two, he disliked the adherents of Gottsched most, he was quite willing to help the Swiss writers in the warfare they had so long conducted. He persuaded Voss to publish two works, mainly by Wieland, one of them—"A Dunciad for the Germans"—designed to give the Leipzig poets a

[1] S. S. iii. p. 402. [2] Danzel, p. 193.

bad quarter-of-an-hour; and he and Nicolai drew up an amusing scheme of a poem, in imitation of "Hudibras," representing the knight-errant Gottsched with his faithful squire Von Schönaich riding through Germany to slay the innumerable seraphim with whom Klopstock and his imitators had filled the land. Had this plan been realised, the pain it would have given would not have been confined to one side.

III.

During his former residence at Berlin, Lessing had issued his lyrics in a small volume entitled "Trifles." Immediately after his return from Wittenberg, he prepared to make a much more serious bid for fame. This was nothing less than the publication, in a series of volumes, of all the writings he had completed, and on which he set any value. In 1753 the two first volumes appeared. They included his lyrics, his epigrams, the "Letters" to which allusion has repeatedly been made, "The Young Scholar," and "The Jews." These were followed in 1754 by two other volumes, containing the "Vindications" and more plays. The fifth and sixth volumes, which concluded the series, were published in 1755, and were made up wholly of plays. These volumes were unusually small in size, but their contents were so sharply distinguished from the heavy productions with which German authors then, for the most part, regaled the public, that they at once took a distinct place in contemporary literature. In a very short time Lessing esteemed them lightly, and, compared with his mature works, they are certainly of slight importance. Had he achieved nothing more, it is possible his name would still have been known, but not as a name ranking high above the ordinary level. The men of the day, however, judged him by a different standard; and it is not too much to say that these volumes led them to look to him with respect and hope, not only as a critic and a scholar, but as a dramatist, an epigrammatist, and a lyrical poet. Many reviews appeared

as the volumes were issued. Of these Lessing appreciated most highly the articles written by Michaelis, the well-known biblical critic, who occasionally wrote on general literature. In the "Göttingen Gelehrten Anzeigen" he hailed Lessing at once as a writer of whom Germany had cause to be proud. The young author was naturally much pleased by this cordial recognition from one whose judgment was universally respected, and wrote to Michaelis to thank him for his words of encouragement. In his answer, Michaelis expressed a wish for more intimate acquaintance, and Lessing responded by stating the main facts of his life up to the time of his writing. "What may yet happen," this account of himself concludes,[1] "I leave to Providence. I do not believe any one can be more indifferent respecting the future than I." From this time forward friendly relations were kept up; and in the last and greatest of his controversies Lessing respectfully alludes to Michaelis.

The publication of the first two volumes of Lessing's writings was followed by consequences of great importance to his position and prospects. For nine years Lange, the head of the Halle School, had been engaged on a poetical translation of Horace. As his odes were considered to approach more nearly to the spirit of Horace than those of any other German writer, and he had the reputation of being an accomplished scholar, high expectations were formed regarding the forthcoming work. At last, while Lessing was at Wittenberg, it appeared; and as it was dedicated to, and graciously accepted by, Frederick II., it was ostentatiously welcomed by classes which were not in the habit of paying much attention to native literature. Lessing, being then deep in the study of Horace, was prepared to receive much pleasure from the translation, especially as Lange's name had always been favourably known to him. To his astonishment, he had no sooner glanced through a page or two than he discovered gross blunders: errors not arising from mere want of taste, but from ignor-

[1] S. S. xii. p. 37.

ance of the meaning of words and of ordinary grammatical rules. He forthwith amused himself by writing a paper in which some of the more inexcusable of these mistakes were pointed out. It so happened that some time before this unfavourable judgment of Lange's book had been formed, Professor Nicolai of Halle, a brother of the Nicolai who was to become so close a friend of Lessing, passed through Wittenberg, and called upon him. They liked each other; and in a letter Lessing soon after wrote to Nicolai, he referred to the translation, and said he thought of warning the public of its true character. Nicolai, who knew Lange well, was anxious to save his friend this humiliation, and suggested that Lessing should submit his criticism to the poet, adding that the latter would of course pay for the article at as liberal a rate as a publisher. Lessing declared that he had no objection to point out to Lange some of his mistakes, but did not even allude to the proposal of payment, which he deemed unworthy of notice. Misunderstanding this silence, Nicolai went to Lange, and telling him that an experienced writer had ready for publication a paper on his book, exposing serious errors, advised him to buy the criticism and profit in a future edition by its hints. Lange declined; and so, it appeared, the matter had come to an end.

In his "Letters" Lessing included the article on Lange; and as it was trenchant, and seemed likely to lead to one of those literary quarrels in which many spectators take so strange a delight, a Hamburg journal quoted the paper in full. Lange felt keenly stung, and addressed to the journal a long and angry letter. Had he been content to make the best defence he could of his scholarship, nothing very remarkable would have come of the dispute; but, unfortunately for himself, he not only railed at Lessing as a scholar whose learning was derived wholly from Bayle, and jeered at his writings—referring to their small size—as a sort of "Vade Mecum," but attacked his critic's moral character. He represented Lessing as a

literary freebooter, who had threatened, unless bought off, to attack him, and who had published the criticism merely because his base offer had not been accepted.

This was the third time Lessing had been brought before the public in a questionable light, and he was justly indignant at the slight upon his honour. He resolved that no one should venture to play him a similar trick a fourth time without being aware that the result would be disagreeable. In Voss's paper he inserted a brief paragraph denying Lange's accusation, and then set about the preparation of a full reply. This appeared early in 1754, and was entitled, in allusion to the pastor's small witticism, "A Vade Mecum for Herr Sam. Gotth. Lange" ("Ein Vade Mecum für den Herrn Sam. Gotth. Lange"). A more crushing piece of criticism was never written. With mock formality, Lessing divides it, like a sermon, into two heads, the first treating of Lange's mistakes of scholarship, the second of his misrepresentation of the author's character. The first head, again, is subdivided into two parts, one dealing with Lange's answer to Lessing's previous criticism, the other with blunders not before pointed out. "A glass of fresh spring water," he says,[1] after setting forth these divisions, "to calm a little the agitation of your boiling blood, will be very serviceable to you before passing to our first subdivision. Another, Herr Pastor! Now, then, let us begin." Lessing has no difficulty in convicting his opponent of utter incapacity, and accompanies the exposure of his astounding mistakes with a running fire of deadly satire. In the concluding part, in which the incident Lange had so grossly misrepresented is truly stated, Lessing goes straight to the mark, and boldly brands the culprit as a "slanderer."

The effect of this powerful essay was instantaneous. The whole learned world of Germany read it, and the most distinguished scholars admitted its justice. The unfortunate Lange, who had brought upon himself so severe a punishment, never retrieved his position. Every joint of

[1] S. S. iii. p. 412.

his armour had been pierced, and even while he lived the time came when he was known solely as the enemy against whom Lessing had gained his first triumph.

In Lessing's later critical works he is never content with merely negative results; he uses the blunders and misconceptions of those he criticises as occasions for the exposition of positive critical doctrine. There is nothing of this kind in the "Vade Mecum." It is nevertheless still of value, for it is far more than a mere exposure of ignorant blunders; it is full of genuine dramatic force. Herr Lange lives in its pages not only as the man who had offended his assailant, but as the type of dulness, inaccuracy, and the overbearing temper of a pretentious pedant. These qualities are confined to no particular time; they appear in every age, and they are of all qualities the most repugnant to the literary spirit. It is to this general aspect of the book that it will always owe whatever freshness it possesses.

IV.

Notwithstanding Horace's wit and philosophy, it was at one time the fashion to hold his personal character in contempt. It was not only that his critics considered him an easy-going Epicurean; he was described, partly on the ground of external, but mainly on that of internal evidence, as a gross sensualist, a gourmand, and an atheist. Having been much occupied with the study of this poet when at Wittenberg and in replying to Lange, Lessing undertook, in 1754, to dissipate the prevailing conception, and included the paper in which he embodied his ideas in the "Vindications." It is the only one of these essays which has a classical subject, and, on the whole, it is the best of the collection. Horace is treated in it as a friend whom it is a duty to defend against ignorant and malicious slanderers. The external evidence is first dealt with, and shown to be worthless; Lessing then turns to the writings of Horace, and protests against the notion that a poet's

raptures are to be taken too literally. The poet, he insists, moves in an ideal world, bathing all things in the rich hues of fancy, and it is utterly misleading to confound that ideal world with his actual life. "Must he have emptied all the glasses he professes to have emptied; kissed all the maidens he professes to have kissed? Here, as everywhere, malice prevails. Let him express the most splendid moral truths, the most sublime thoughts concerning God and virtue: it will not be allowed that his heart is the source of these; everything beautiful, it will be urged, he says as a poet. But let anything offensive, however slight, escape him; speedily it will be said that out of the fulness of the heart the mouth speaks." [1] The various passages on which the unfavourable theory of Horace's tastes and sympathies is based are passed in review; and it is now generally admitted that the more generous interpretation is perfectly in accordance with the text. So just a critic could not wish to make out that Horace was of particularly heroic mould; but Lessing did think that he was distinctly above the average moral level of his time, and so much the essay may be held to prove. Of real interest on this ground, it is still more interesting because of the scorn which glows through it for those mean people who incessantly strive to drag illustrious names in the dust, and because of the fine sympathy which impels the writer to vindicate a spiritual associate, separated from him by many centuries, with as profound earnestness as if the bond between the two were that of daily and intimate comrades.

In the same year Lessing had a difficult task to perform of a very different kind. This was to edit the literary works of Mylius, and to prefix to them a critical estimate of his labours. Lessing would rather not have undertaken the duty, but the friends of Mylius insisted that no one else knew him so well, and that therefore no one was so well fitted to describe him to the public. The question

[1] S. S. iv. p. 20.

was, should he content himself with a few formal praises, or attempt something like a true sketch? Most men would have preferred the former alternative. It seems so hard to say anything harsh of those just dead, especially of those with whom during life we have been familiar, that few have the courage, even when plain speech is imperatively demanded, to speak plainly. Lessing, however, would not allow a prejudice of this kind to induce him to play false with his readers; he would utter the truth or nothing. "I was," he says, "several years one of his most intimate friends, and now I am his editor: two circumstances which might be sufficient excuse for my launching out in his praise, if I did not scruple to flatter one in death who during his lifetime never found me a flatterer."[1] The criticism is in the shape of a series of letters addressed to a common friend; and the first presents an outline, pervaded by a tone of sincere regret at the loss German letters had sustained, of the literary career of Mylius. In the remaining letters each class of his achievements is taken up in turn and calmly judged. Lessing hardly treats them as serious attempts at literature; and sometimes, as he wrote, he must almost have fancied his friend was before him, and that he was bantering him, as he had often done when they lived and worked together. Speaking of the first writing which Mylius had published with his name—an ode—he says:[2] "I call it an ode, because Herr Mylius himself so calls it, and an author may without doubt give his productions what names he chooses." Of an essay justifying the vivisection of animals for scientific purposes this is how he writes:[3] "From this article we may see, among other things, that he must then have learned algebra. He piles up his a's and x's like one who has not long been familiar with them. He has, however, this in common with very great analysts, that he perfectly succeeds by the use of abstract symbols in making for half his readers a riddle out of a truth which would be easily

[1] S. S. iv. p. 479. [2] S. S. iv. p. 483. [3] S. S. iv. p. 484.

comprehensible if expressed in common terms. But—as if one wrote only to make one's readers wise! Enough if a writer shows that he is wise himself!" Mylius wrote several comedies, and, like all superficial dramatists, he composed quickly. "When he had formed his scheme," says Lessing,[1] in reference to one of his dramatic efforts, "it cost him only four nights to complete it—a period which another, going without sleep, will spend in the arrangement of a single scene. While he was occupied with it, I more than once envied him his facility; but when he had finished, and read his production to me, I was again the magnanimous friend in whose soul there was not the smallest trace of envy." The labours of Mylius as a writer of weekly moral essays give occasion to the following:[2]—"You know who were the first authors in this kind of literature—men wanting neither in wit, thought, scholarship, nor knowledge of the world—Englishmen who, in the greatest calm, and in easy circumstances, could study with attention whatever influences the spirit and manners of the nation. But who are their imitators among us? For the most part, young witlings who have scarce mastered the German language, have read a little here and there, and—worst of all—are obliged to make money by their papers."

Lessing was conscious of the strange impression which a criticism written in a spirit so absolutely impartial would produce. "Etrange monument," he wrote to Kästner,[3] the friend whom both he and Mylius had known so well at Leipzig, "disez vous peut-être, et j'en conviens. Pourquoi me l'a-t-on extorqué? On voulut absolument un recueil de ses pièces fugitives et surtout de ses poésies; le voilà donc. Sans ma préface il ne manqueroit pas de charmer M. Gottsched. Mais jugez vous même, si je n'ai pas bien fait de sauver les Manes de Mylius de la honte d'être loué par cet opprobre des gens d'esprit."

Possibly, at a later stage, when the sense of justice was

[1] S. S. iv. p. 490. [2] S. S. iv. p. 486. [3] S. S. xii. p. 38.

not less powerful, but touched by softening influences of which youth knows not, and when the slight token of a life's energies would have been too closely associated with the tragedy of baffled hope lying behind it to be judged solely by a standard of ideal excellence, Lessing would have been rather more anxious to make something of whatever merit lay in his friend's writings. He had, however, an unusually strong motive for stating his ideas in their full strength. He was everywhere known as the friend of Mylius, and, as we have seen, the friendship had caused him serious trouble in his own family. It was natural it should be assumed that he shared the aims and modes of life of one he knew so well. In self-defence he drew in sharp lines the bounds beyond which his intimacy had never passed, thus negatively defining his own position, and separating himself off from the noisy class of so-called literary men whose ostentatious gaiety was but a poor compensation for their utter lack of any noble or worthy purpose in life.

The friendship of Lessing and Mendelssohn ripened so quickly that in 1755 they undertook the preparation of a joint critical work. The Berlin Academy of Sciences had announced as the subject of a prize-essay the philosophical system of Pope. The candidates were required, first, to expound this system; second, to compare it with the system of Leibnitz; third, to give reasons for its acceptance or rejection. The choice of the subject was probably due to Maupertuis, president of the Academy, who bitterly disliked the philosophy of Leibnitz, and hoped thus to damage it in the esteem of the reading world. The two friends agreed that the theme was one which ought never to have been proposed, and to prove this they wrote an essay which they published with the title "Pope a Metaphysician" ("Pope ein Metaphysiker").

The treatise starts with the principle that a poet as such cannot possibly develop a philosophical system. The metaphysician must strictly define his terms; he must never, without explanation, depart from the meaning he

ascribes to them; he must not exchange them for others that appear synonymous. Figures of speech, which can in no case be strictly accurate, are not allowed to him; and he must proceed according to a fixed method from simple to complex truths. All this is wholly opposed to the free movement of the poet. It is true that Lucretius develops a system in his "De Rerum Natura;" but, of course, there is no reason why philosophy should not be expounded in verse, only such verse cannot claim to be regarded as poetry.

Pope, therefore, as a poet, could not be a metaphysician, and he would not have been one if he could. His aim was to justify the ways of God to man, to produce in the minds of his readers a vivid impression that these ways, although not fully understood, are absolutely right and wise. For this purpose he could not desire to follow the lead of any one school, for each school is unjust to particular classes of truths. The Stoic does not do justice to pleasure, nor the Epicurean to virtue. It was necessary he should go from one system to another, select from them whatever was most in keeping with his main object, and combine the various elements into a harmonious picture.

Assuming, however, for a moment that, notwithstanding these considerations, there is a system in the "Essay on Man," the writers set out in search of it, and bring together the various propositions in which it must be supposed to be contained. These propositions are then compared with the doctrine of Leibnitz, and with masterly vigour and clearness it is proved that such fundamental ideas as may be found in Pope do not truly represent those of the German philosopher. The next step is to demonstrate that the system which has been set up as Pope's is a mere house of cards. The authors have no difficulty in showing that he makes some assertions which are flatly contradictory, others which cannot be logically defended, and others for which the proof he adduces is insufficient. In a word, he is not, and does not pretend to be, a philosopher. He merely aims at exciting a certain feeling respecting the

order of the world; and his mode of attaining this end is to collect from different quarters a variety of ideas, the truth of which is of less concern to him than their capacity of being effectively stated.

'The final passages deal with the sources from which Pope chiefly derived his conclusions. Shaftesbury is indicated as one of his authorities; but he is not allowed to have properly understood this writer, who is highly praised, and recommended to the Academy as a much truer parallel than Pope to Leibnitz. Archbishop King is the author from whom he is represented as drawing most freely; and this view is probably accurate. Johnson, following Lord Bathurst, affirms that Pope received the scheme of his poem from Bolingbroke; but internal evidence is altogether in favour of the theory of the German critics. Nothing was more natural than that Pope should have looked into King, whose "Origin of Evil" was very generally read by the thoughtful men of the day.

The view of Pope taken in this treatise would not now be called in question. No one would in our day dream of going to the "Essay on Man" for a coherent body of doctrine; the most ardent admirers of the poem would admit that it is full of inconsistencies, and that its mode of argument is weak and superficial. In one respect, however, the criticism is defective. It seems to be assumed throughout that although Pope cannot claim the honours of a metaphysician, his treatment of his theme is poetically adequate. Since Goethe, Wordsworth, Shelley, and Victor Hugo, this can no longer be admitted. The poetry of mere common sense can do nothing to meet the cravings of the religious mind; at best, it can approach but the outward aspects of spiritual questions. Now Pope seldom rose above the level of common sense. He was wholly without insight, and could not have understood silent awe and reverence. The baffling problems of existence were without fascination for him; and he undertook to say something about them for no other reason than that it was the

fashion of his day to discuss theology, as it was the fashion to discuss the doings of the Ministry and the Opposition. His steps in the paths grandly trodden by Dante and Milton were thus as feeble and uncertain as would have been those of Lely or Kneller in the sublime altitudes of Michael Angelo. The value of the "Essay on Man" consists less in its ideas than its manner of expressing them. Pope has little to say that is worth saying, but he says it with so much terseness and grace that each generation turns with pleasure to his artistic platitudes, and passes by the profounder conclusions of less attractive teachers.[1]

No direct clue is given in "Pope a Metaphysician" to the manner in which the two authors divided the labour between them. The style and mode of thought, however, are throughout Lessing's; and we cannot be wrong in assuming that the work is substantially his. Mendelssohn can hardly have done more than contribute to the partial exposition of the philosophy of Leibnitz, although it is possible, since he was well read in the serious literature of England, that to him are also due the references to Shaftesbury and King.

The little book was not a success, so far as its sale was concerned. In 1756 we find Lessing, in reference to some complaint of Mendelssohn respecting the indifference of the public, asking him, "Will they still hear nothing of the philosopher Pope?" In private, however, some members of the Academy showed that they were far from pleased with so disrespectful a treatment of the subject they had selected. "Quant à ce qui regarde M. Lessing," wrote De Beausobre to Gottsched,[2] "je ne le connois que de nom, assez ignoré chez nous; il mérite de l'être chez nos voisins. Son ouvrage, Monsieur, a été attribué longtemps à un Juif nommé Moyse, et je ne sais pas encore bien certainement, s'il est de Lessing. Je chargerai quelqu'un de donner quelques petits conseils a ce écrivain mordant."

[1] See this view admirably stated in Mr. Mark Pattison's introduction to his edition of the "Essay on Man."

[2] Danzel, p. 279.

V.

While at Wittenberg Lessing seems to have devoted less attention to the drama than usual; but on his return to Berlin he resumed his dramatic studies. They led to the publication of a periodical which he desired to be regarded as the successor of the unlucky venture he and Mylius began with such high hopes, and which came to so untimely an end. The title was changed to "The Theatrical Library" ("Theatralische Bibliothek"), and the aim of the undertaking was greatly restricted. He no longer promised to criticise contemporary German dramatists, or to afford a general view of the existing condition of the German stage. And as regarded the writers, whether poets or critics, whom he proposed to introduce to his readers, he decided to confine himself strictly to those whose positive merits were likely to repay investigation. Two numbers appeared in 1754; a third in 1755; the fourth and last was published in 1758, during his third residence at the Prussian capital. They are made up chiefly of translations and abstracts; and although of value to a community in which the theatre had not yet taken deep root, and which had no national drama, they are now of slight interest. One of the most important contributions is the first paper of the first number, in which he translates two treatises, one in Latin by Gellert, the other in French by a Frenchman, whose initials only are given, on "comédie larmoyante." In a brief preface Lessing refers to it rather slightingly as an offspring of French vanity. The French were tired, he says, of seeing themselves always ridiculed in comedy, and wished to be represented in a more noble light. Hence their comic writers sought to draw tears rather than to excite laughter: an explanation which falls far short of the facts, and which Lessing afterwards gave up.

In some remarks added to the translation of a French work on acting, he sets forth a principle of very great importance. This is, that it is not enough for the actor to

experience the feelings he is to represent; he must also be master of their expression. There are certain universal expressions of feeling; and it is the business of the actor to learn these in their most general form. If he has not done this, no amount of feeling will enable him to impress the spectators; while if he has, he may produce an effect without having the feelings of which he displays the outward manifestations. After stating this doctrine, Lessing announces that he will shortly publish an exhaustive treatise on the subject. He never carried out his purpose; but several fragments of the proposed work have been preserved, and from them it is clear that he had long made the actor's art a subject of profound and systematic study.

In criticising Lessing's drama, "The Jews," Michaelis had expressed a doubt whether an oppressed and despised race could produce so noble a man as its hero. Mendelssohn was naturally indignant at so unjust a statement, and in an eloquent letter to a Jewish friend commented on the critic's prejudice and narrowness of mind. This letter was handed to Lessing, who published it in the "Theatrical Library," along with some observations of his own, as the most effective reply possible. Having sent to Michaelis a copy of the number containing the letter, he thus wrote to him on the subject:[1] "I have been so free as to make some response to the remarks you were kind enough to offer on my 'Jews.' I hope the way in which I have done it will not be displeasing to you. I am a little anxious only about the accompanying letter. If it contains some offensive expressions, which I do not approve but have no right to change, I beg you always to call the author to mind. He is really a Jew, a man of five-and-twenty, who, without any instruction, has acquired great attainments in languages, in mathematics, in philosophy, in poetry. I foresee in him an honour to our nation, if he is allowed to come to maturity by his co-religionists, who have always dis-

[1] S. S. xii. p. 36.

played an unfortunate spirit of persecution towards men like him. His candour and his philosophical spirit cause me to regard him in anticipation as a second Spinoza, for perfect resemblance with whom he will lack nothing but Spinoza's errors."

Lessing so disliked all theatrical display of feeling that superficial observers sometimes supposed him to be of a cold temperament. It will be seen, however, from this letter, that there never was a more generous and high-minded friend.

VI.

For some years, mainly because there was no regular theatre at Wittenberg or Berlin to stimulate his energies, Lessing gave up even sketching dramatic outlines; but in 1755 he felt once more the creative impulse, and early in the year went to Potsdam for a few weeks to give it free scope. Here he lived in such complete retirement that Kleist—who was still stationed in Potsdam—wrote to Gleim: "Our Lessing has been seven weeks in Potsdam, but nobody has seen him. Shut up in a garden-house, he is said to have written a comedy. He would perhaps have succeeded better if he had not shut himself up, for there are here plenty of fools to laugh at." During these seven weeks he completed "Miss Sara Sampson," a prose tragedy in five acts, which he had planned and partly executed before leaving Berlin.

It was a tradition of the Greek drama that the only proper heroes of tragedy are persons of high social rank. This was also the tradition of the classic stage of France; and in England it was dominant until the early part of last century. Lillo, otherwise of no importance, is memorable for having broken with the tradition in his once famous "George Barnwell;" and he found many imitators, of whom the chief was Moore, author of "The Gamester." In the hands of Richardson the movement received deeper significance, for in "Clarissa Harlowe" the sorrows of

private life were depicted with a skill and insight that commanded the attention of the world.

In the remarks on "comédie larmoyante" just alluded to, Lessing refers also to middle-class tragedy, and as he traces the former to French vanity, so he traces the latter to English pride. "The Frenchman is a creature who always wishes to appear greater than he is. The Englishman is another, who wishes to draw everything great down to his own level." Thus while it was disagreeable to the former to be always laughed at in comedy, it was equally disagreeable to the latter to see crowned heads alone in splendid situations. Englishmen felt that "mighty passions and sublime thoughts were no more for kings than for one taken from among themselves."[1]

Whether or not this is a true account of the matter, Lessing was in full sympathy with the English movement; and in "Miss Sara Sampson" he followed in the steps of Lillo and Richardson. It was distinctly as a tragedy of middle-class life that it was hailed by his contemporaries as a work of high importance.

In all his previous efforts, as we have seen, Lessing was thoroughly French in his ideals and methods. He is not yet independent, but in "Miss Sara Sampson" the influence under which he works is no longer French but English. The change is seen not only in the nature of his subject, but in his characters, who have a close resemblance to those most in favour in contemporary English literature. Even the scene is laid in England; and there is a rapidity of movement and freedom of action and utterance which would have been impossible had the stately steps of French dramatists been followed. In going to England for inspiration, he only did what was then being done by all the younger and more vigorous literary men of Germany. Milton had long been closely studied; and at this time the dramatists of the Restoration, those of the immediately succeeding

[1] S. S. iv. p. 115.

generations, and the brilliant poets and masters of prose in Queen Anne's reign, were all well known. Young and Thomson were general favourites, and Richardson was hardly more admired in London and Paris than by a select circle in Berlin. By-and-by, mainly through Lessing's influence, Shakespeare began also to be read; and so the intellectual yoke of France was slowly broken.

The heroine of "Miss Sara Sampson" is clearly a reminiscence of Clarissa Harlowe. We find in both the same passionate devotion to the proprieties, the same filial loyalty, the same exhaustless feminine goodness. Like Clarissa, Sara runs away with her lover, and when the action begins, they have been for some weeks together at an inn. She is filled with remorse at having, as she supposes, broken the heart of her father, Sir William Sampson, a country clergyman. She entreats Mellefont—only the name recalls "The Double Dealer"—to save her honour by marrying her. He has all the fantastic aversion of the men of his time to marriage, and, while full of love for her, and displaying in his manner the utmost tenderness, puts off the wedding on the plea that he must first make sure of a legacy which a relative who is dying is about to leave him. As they talk of this subject—she with many tears, he with ardent expressions of devotion—a letter is handed to him by which he is deeply moved. This is from Marwood, a beautiful, selfish, and passionate woman who has been his mistress for years, and by whom he has a young daughter, Arabella. Having discovered his hiding-place, she has come to make a last effort to win back his affection. He is furious at her persecutions, and hurries to the inn from which she writes, to get rid of her. She, however, is prepared for him, and displays every kind of wile to revive his dead love. When all else fails, she produces their daughter, and by her influence he is ultimately induced to promise that he will at least return to see them. Immediately after he goes out the spell is broken, and he comes hastily back to say that they must meet no more.

She now casts off disguise; her fury becomes uncontrollable, and plucking a dagger from her bosom, she rushes upon him to slay him. After a struggle she is disarmed. There is then a reaction of feeling, and she entreats to be forgiven. He promises to forget all, on condition that she will instantly return to London and leave their daughter with him. She consents, but begs that before leaving she may be allowed to see her rival, that she may judge whether she can ever hope that the future will be as the past. After some hesitation he agrees to introduce her as Lady Solmes, his cousin.

Meanwhile, Sir William Sampson, whose arrival at Sara's inn occurs in the first scene, has sent by his old and faithful servant, Waitwell, a letter to his daughter, nobly generous in tone. She hardly dares open it, but at last plucks up courage, and as she reads a new light seems to fall on heaven and earth, joy wells up and overflows in her heart. She communicates to Mellefont the glad news, and is so relieved and happy that she makes no difficulty about meeting Lady Solmes. Marwood is torn with jealousy on seeing Sara's beauty and moral loveliness; and when she hears that a reconciliation has taken place by letter with Sir William, she becomes ill and has to hurry away, for it was she who gave the father the daughter's address, in the hope that he would pursue her in anger. Soon afterwards she again appears in Sara's room, and this time Mellefont is called away. She seizes the opportunity to poison the mind of the young girl against her lover, tells Marwood's story so as to reflect disgrace on Mellefont, and to present herself in the light of a deceived and wronged woman; and finally, with Sara at her feet begging for guidance, reveals who she really is. Sara, overwhelmed with horror and disgust, flies shrieking for help. Marwood, after a brief monologue, follows, finds she has fainted, and, before leaving, ostentatiously helps the maid to bring her back to consciousness.

By and by Mellefont comes, and finds Sara suffering at

intervals fearful agony. He sends his servant to secure Marwood; but the servant quickly returns, reports that she has fled with Arabella, and hands him a note she has left for him. This records with fiendish triumph that she has poisoned Sara, and on reading it Mellefont rushes away with cries of anguish. Sir William enters the room just in time to see his daughter die. Before dying she tears up the evidence of Marwood's guilt, and expresses sorrow for the fate of the unfortunate Arabella. Mellefont draws the dagger with which Marwood attempted to murder him, stabs himself, and with his last breath commends Arabella to Sir William's care.

The weakest element in the tragedy is undoubtedly Mellefont, for it is impossible to form anything like a consistent theory of his character. Any one capable of such love as he lavishes on Sara would not have sought for mean excuses for delaying their marriage; and he certainly would not have introduced to her, for such a reason as that Marwood suggests, a woman he had learned to loathe, and who had just tried to kill him. Much less, having introduced her, would he have given her an opportunity of doing the mischief he knew she longed to effect. These are fatal defects, since they imply that the play is without a true tragic motive. We are never impressed by the conviction that sorrow is the one possible issue; we see too clearly the hand of the dramatist bringing about calamity by artificial devices. It must also be said that the scenes are tediously protracted, and that, after the manner of his English models, Lessing makes the characters indulge far too much in vague abstract moralising.

Nevertheless, the play must be sharply distinguished from any he had yet produced. The scope of his art has become larger, and he sounds deeps of human nature of which he had before shown no knowledge. Marwood is the product of an imagination that grasps without fear the most appalling and impressive facts of life. It is possible that she may have been suggested by Millwood, the base

woman who plays the *rôle* of the tempter in "George Barnwell;" but mere smoke is very different from smoke irradiated by a gleam of golden sunshine. She speaks of herself at one moment as a new Medea, but she lacks the sublime qualities of Medea; hers is essentially a low nature, although saved from despicable meanness by its terrific audacity. Of the remaining characters, Sir William Sampson is a somewhat shadowy type of that yearning paternal love which sorrow enriches and deepens: the sort of love that made the Vicar of Wakefield, in the simplicity of his heart, go forth and seek in the cold world for the lamb of his flock which the wolf had snatched. The virtues of women like Sara have justice done to them in real life more readily than in fiction; but in the concluding scenes there is a touch of grandeur in the meekness with which she bows before the awful fate that crashes down upon her happiness and blasts her fair young life.

In the summer of 1755, "Miss Sara Sampson" was acted at Frankfurt-on-the-Oder, and Lessing went there to superintend the preparations. It met with a splendid reception. "Herr Lessing," wrote Ramler to Gleim, with a fine disregard of the consistency of metaphors, "has had his tragedy represented at Frankfurt, and the audience, who listened for three and a half hours, sat like statues and wept."

A few years afterwards the play was reviewed and partly translated in the "Journal Etranger." The writer, a disciple of Diderot, although blaming it for the inadequacy of the links by which some of the scenes and incidents are connected, treats it as a work of high power, and as affording proof that in Germany the drama had begun to look to nature for its best effects. One of his criticisms is, that if Marwood was to be allowed to see Sara at all, she should have been so, not on the ground of curiosity, but because she desired, on saying farewell to Mellefont, to commend Arabella to his wife's love. This, he thinks, would have been so like a movement of pathetic feeling that Mellefont would have granted the request without suspicion.

Shortly after the appearance of this review the play was acted in French in the private theatre of the Duke d'Ayen at St. Germain-en-Laye. "It is said," wrote Grimm in one of his letters, "that the Countess de Tessé, daughter of the Duke d'Ayen, played the part of Miss Sara in a ravishing manner, and it is easy to believe it. Her brother, the Count d'Ayen, adds to more essential and distinguished virtues that of an excellent comedian; he played the part of Sara's lover. This piece, presented before the greatest company in France, received great applause, and produced the most powerful impression." [1]

VII.

In 1755, Lessing began to be tired of his life in Berlin. His means of living were precarious; and if he remained, he had nothing to look forward to but a continuance of the hard and poorly paid work he had carried on for three years. For some time he was in negotiation about a professorship at the newly-founded university of Moscow, and in a letter to his father he intimated that it was quite possible he might accept the offer. The success of "Miss Sara Sampson," however, which was speedily put upon the boards of nearly every theatre in Germany, filled him with a desire to be intimately connected with the stage. Koch had recently opened a theatre in Leipzig, and one of the principal members of his company was a young man named Brückner, who had been in Voss's business, and to whose theatrical training Lessing had given considerable attention. Here, therefore, there seemed to be a good chance for a young and popular dramatic writer. He resolved not to let the opportunity slip, and in October, 1755, he reached the town he had so hurriedly left seven years before: quietly making his escape from Berlin without going through the formality of saying farewell to his friends.

[1] Danzel, p. 475.

CHAPTER VII.

SECOND RESIDENCE IN LEIPZIG.

I.

ALTHOUGH Lessing was not fond of writing letters, his real friends found him on the whole a tolerably faithful correspondent; and luckily, from the time we have now reached, a good many letters have been preserved which enable us to understand the moods and sympathies that marked the various periods of his career. They are singularly attractive letters. Without a trace of sentimentalism, they give evidence of a thoroughly genial nature; and although their style is almost as finished as that of his published writings, it never suggests the idea of effort. He obviously writes only what is in his mind at the moment, and, as nearly as possible, talks as he would if space were suddenly to yield to the demands of affection, and he were brought face to face with the friend he is addressing. It is strange to take up, generations after he has passed into silence, these waifs and strays of a great man's life. For the time, we almost fancy we can catch the murmur of the far-off sea by whose laughing or storm-driven waves they were flung upon the shore.

Two letters, written in December, 1755, one to Mendelssohn, the other to Ramler, betoken a gay and cheerful temper, as of one who has no fear for the future and troubles himself with no useless regrets for the past. Alluding to a conversation of Mendelssohn with Maupertuis, he reminds his friend of an interview between Charles XII., "a hero like the ancient heroes, who preferred to create rather than be kings,"[1] and the King of

[1] Sämmtliche Schriften, xii. p. 42.

Poland, "also, they say, a hero, but at most a subaltern hero." "These two potentates met in the capital of the latter, while it was being besieged by the former. What did they talk of at so critical a moment? Of their boots." "It would have been," he adds, "not a little comical, if you and Maupertuis had said anything of importance to each other; and as at present everything pleases me better the more comical it is, I shall be very glad if you did so. Visit the great man diligently; but you need not write to me every time you see him; you may tell me of your visits when I am not amused by what is comical."

To Ramler he says:[1] "In the few weeks since I left Berlin, dearest friend, I have thought of you more than a thousand times, spoken of you more than a hundred times, determined more than twenty times to write to you, and begun to write to you more than three times. In the first letter I tried to imitate the stage-coach wit of Herr Gellert; for you know that I travelled from Berlin in a stage-coach. I had not, indeed, the luck to travel with a hangman, and never needed, at the violent jolts of the carriage, to feel if I still had a head. I did, however, find an amusing person among my travelling companions: a young Swiss, who argued half the way with an Austrian about the superiority of their dialects. However, I soon bethought me that nothing comes of imitation, and began a second letter, in which I was to be original, and avoid chatter as well as compliments: compliments, dearest Ramler, but not less sincere assurances how valuable to me is your friendship, about which I do not cease to complain that I obtained it so late in Berlin. Complain of whom? Of myself: of my wilful habit of regarding even friends as gifts of fortune that I will rather find than search for. In my third letter I prepared to give you only news, and to tell you all those whose acquaintance I had here made. I wished to write to you that I had several times visited Herr Gellert. The first time I came to him a young baron,

[1] S. S. xii. p. 45.

who was about to travel to Paris, was taking leave of him. Can you guess what the modest poet begged of the baron? To defend him if in Paris they said anything bad against him. How fortunate, thought I to myself, am I, of whom they say nothing in Paris, either bad or good! But tell me, what epithet would you apply to such a request? Naïve or silly? Herr Gellert is otherwise the best man in the world. My fourth letter—but it is enough that I have given you specimens of the first three to prove that I really intended to write."

This letter affords proof of the attention Lessing now excited, for he begs Ramler to contradict a report that he was the author of Nicolai's letters on the existing condition of German literature, and adds: "I had as much to do with them as with the 'Dunciad,' which Gottsched here sets down with all his might to my account. And you know that of this I am perfectly innocent."[1]

Lessing seems to have seen Gellert pretty often at this time. There was, however, no genuine sympathy between the two men. Gellert lived in a world of mild sentiment and gentle platitudes, and rather shrank from the fearless intellect which swept aside conventions, and spoke out its convictions in clear tones. One day Lessing went to visit him, and found him in low spirits, reading an ordinary book of devotions. "Do not," pleaded the simple enthusiast, "disturb me in my faith, the only consolation in my sufferings."

Since the days of student life, Weisse, like Lessing himself, had worked hard as a dramatist, and their impulses were so far similar that both were equally disliked by Gottsched. Weisse, however, was essentially commonplace; and qualities which were gratifying enough to the immature youth had no longer stimulus for one who had pushed upwards to an independent position in literature. Weisse's snare was the extraordinary facility with which he wrote. He could begin work at any moment, and, having begun,

[1] S. S. xii. p. 47.

go on until his physical energies were exhausted. Lessing had no faith in results easily achieved, and strove to raise to a higher level his friend's ideal. "If," he would say, "I could only make work thoroughly hard for you, you might become an author."

The associates from whom he derived most pleasure were undoubtedly Koch and his fellow-actors. They did not affect to be literary men, were free from many of the restraints which make ordinary society irksome, and practised an art in which he was profoundly interested. It is evident that he was highly popular among them, partly because of his genial temperament, partly because his conception of their worth tended to deepen their self-respect.

Almost immediately after his arrival in Leipzig he resumed dramatic work. Unfortunately, he did not continue on the path he had so decisively struck out in "Miss Sara Sampson." He became acquainted with the works of Goldoni, the most prolific of Italian playwrights; and, attracted by one of that writer's dramas, "L' Erede fortunata," he resolved to make the plot the basis of a comedy of his own. His intention was to publish at Easter, 1756, a volume containing six plays, of which this was to be one. Of the others he had long had sketches in his portfolio. In the letter to Mendelssohn already alluded to, he says he is hastening to get all his "childish trifles" out of the way, for "the longer I put off doing so," he declares, "the more severe, I fear, will be the judgment which I shall myself pass upon them." The scheme, like so many others, came to nothing.

With all his energy, Lessing was of an extremely dilatory nature. He formed plans with startling rapidity, but there was nothing he disliked more than to begin in earnest to realise them. Having once taken shape in his mind, they ought, he seemed to think, to leap forth like Athena from the brain of Zeus, full armed. He would put off to the last moment any task he undertook; and having set to work, he would soon become tired of occupy-

ing himself with one subject, and pass on to another. Partly to prevent himself from giving way to this tendency, he was in the habit of sending his MS. to the printer as he proceeded. Two sheets of the new comedy were thus printed; but he speedily lost interest in it, and resumed it more unwillingly every day. His bookseller, who was severely practical, did not understand this unbusiness-like way of going on, and expostulated. The flowers of Lessing's genius could not be forced; they could bloom only in the nimble air and open sunshine. He resisted the publisher's interference, threw his comedy aside, and thought no more of the proposed volume. Some years afterwards Nicolai heard of the incident, and, more anxious than Lessing himself about his writings, begged the bookseller to let him have the proofs which had been printed; but that person knew nothing about them. The printer had, however, preserved one sheet, and after Lessing's death, the first part of the MS. was found among his papers. Judging from the scenes we possess, there is not much reason to regret that the idea was not fully realised. The fragment is, indeed, more swift and strong in style than his youthful comedies, but it lacks the supreme virtue of "Miss Sara Sampson:" its men and women are not real persons, but conventional figures who have to go through a definite amount of more or less clever talking. The tiresome Lisette appears with precisely the same sprightliness, audacity, and love of intrigue that mark her in the earlier writings; and the more important characters are conceived with hardly more originality or force.

"Miss Sara Sampson" was not produced in Leipzig until the spring of 1756, and then in a somewhat abridged form. Lessing, who thought it most difficult to shorten a single scene of a play without impairing its excellence, would not undertake the task of bringing the tragedy within the limits required by Koch. Weisse had no such scruples, and cut down the work, very much to his own satisfaction, but not at all to that of the author.

II.

There are few more distinct notes of the modern man than his love of travel. His own country does not suffice for his intellectual needs. Profoundly influenced by the ideas, the art, the science of other lands, he longs to come into direct contact with the life in which these have their root. To the end of his days Lessing was never without the desire to visit the great centres of European culture; and after he went to Leipzig, the wish became so strong that he was willing to accept an irksome post Sulzer offered to obtain for him—that of travelling tutor to a boy who was to be sent off to see the world. Before the engagement could be made, a much more favourable chance presented itself. A wealthy young citizen of Leipzig, named Winkler, had resolved to spend three years in making the grand tour, which was to include a visit to Holland, England, France, and Italy. By some means or other Lessing was introduced to him, and as Winkler could not have a better companion than one acquainted with the language, history, and literature of every country he proposed to go to, he asked Lessing to accompany him, offering both to pay his travelling expenses and to give him a liberal salary. Lessing at once accepted the proposal, and looked forward to three years of intenser happiness than any he had yet known.

Already, while he was writing to Mendelssohn in December, 1755, the matter was settled; and in that letter he thus announces his decision: "Should the public be inclined to humble me a little as a too diligent writer, should it deny me its applause because I have too often sought it, I will bribe it by the promise that from next Easter it shall neither see nor hear anything of me for three whole years. How will that happen? you will certainly ask. I must give you, therefore, the most important piece of news it is possible for me to give about myself. It cannot have been at an unfortunate hour that I left Berlin. You know the

proposal Professor Sulzer made to me about a journey into foreign lands. Nothing will now come of this, because I have accepted another, which is incomparably more advantageous to me. I shall travel, not as a tutor, not with a boy by whom I should feel burdened to the soul, not after the directions of a wilful family, but merely as the companion of a man who lacks neither the power nor the will to make the journey as useful and pleasant to me as I could make it for myself. He is a young man named Winkler, about my age, of a very good character, without parents and friends by whose fancies he must direct himself. He is inclined to leave all the arrangements to me, and in the end he will rather have travelled with me than I with him."

They did not start till May, 1756; but it may be believed that long before that time the excitement caused by a prospect so much in accordance with Lessing's deepest wishes unfitted him for serious work. It was, doubtless, partly responsible for his failure to complete the scheme in which he was to make the most of his "childish trifles." As the time for setting out approached, he was obliged to make a number of small journeys—as, for instance, to Altenburg and Gera—and he also went for a time to Dresden, probably to study the art collections there with a view to preparing himself for the splendid opportunities of æsthetic culture to which he looked forward. By an odd chance, Heyne and Winckelmann were both then in Dresden, the former in a minor post at the Brühl Library, the latter acting as secretary to Count Bünau, and already dreaming of that sojourn in Rome in which he was to do so much for the true appreciation of ancient art. Lessing made Heyne's acquaintance, but Winckelmann, with whom his name was to be permanently associated, he did not meet.

It so happened that his parents visited Dresden at the same time as himself. For eight years he had not seen them; but they had long ago abandoned their opposi-

tion to his scheme of life. It was not only that they saw opposition to be useless, but when a grave theologian and scholar like Michaelis estimated Gotthold's work so highly, the pastor knew that a more brilliant and a truer success was attainable than he had deemed possible; and when her lord changed his opinion, it was not, of course, for the Frau Pastorin to hold out obstinately against him. We have only one letter from Lessing to his father between the time of his first residence in Berlin and the period we have now reached. It was written early in 1755, and is in a tone which indicates that the old bitter strife had been practically forgotten. His brother Gottlob had been entrusted for a time to his keeping, so that clearly a literary career was no longer thought to imply the wreck of every good and great principle. The meeting at Dresden was, therefore, perfectly cordial on both sides; and Lessing went with his parents to Kamenz, where he stopped a week, intending—he was unable to fulfil his purpose—to return before finally leaving Leipzig. From this time there are numerous letters to his father, and through all of them breathes a spirit of deep filial loyalty. We miss the touch of playfulness which gives its supreme charm to the relation of son and parent, but there is always unaffected love and respect. By-and-by, when hard pressed by the necessity of providing for a large family, the pastor and his wife made incessant demands on the slender purse of Lessing. It is easy to see sometimes that they claim more than he can do for them; but an impatient word never escapes him—he makes all kinds of sacrifices to meet their wishes.

At length, on May 10, 1756, the last packet was made up, the last order given, and Lessing started with Winkler for Holland. They went right through Germany, by Magdeburg and Brunswick, to Hamburg; from thence to Bremen, and so into the United Provinces, through the northern districts of which they wandered for some time, landing at the end of July in Amsterdam. Such a journey

was made in those days in comfortless carriages, which jolted over uneven and dirty roads; but it is not in all respects an advantage to whirl in furious haste past mountain and river, hamlet and city. The eighteenth century traveller had time to form a clear impression of the country through which he went, to exchange words of greeting with people at inns by the roadside, to stop for a day at this town or that, if it happened in some unforeseen way to hit his fancy. It was thus that Lessing passed with Winkler from Leipzig to Amsterdam. Details of the journey are not known, for a diary he kept, which, after his death, came into his brother's possession, was lost. One fact of importance, however, we do know; and that is that he diligently studied the few collections of art which existed on his route. He acquired an especially wide knowledge of engravings, and induced Winkler to buy a good many fine specimens. Only once we catch a definite glimpse of him; it is at Hamburg, where, through the introduction of Weisse, he met Eckhoff, the greatest living German actor. "My intercourse with Herr Magister Lessing," wrote Eckhoff soon afterwards to Weisse,[1] "enchanted me. How much gratitude do I not owe you for making me acquainted with so excellent a man! If he did not flatter me, he was tolerably pleased with my acting."

The intention of the travellers was to make excursions from Amsterdam to the chief Dutch towns, and in the beginning of October to take ship for England. Lessing must have desired with some eagerness to visit a country to whose literature he was already so deeply indebted; but he never saw England. Before October, he and Winkler were back in Leipzig.

The event which caused this precipitate retreat caused many a more bitter disappointment, and was destined to influence deeply the whole progress of Europe. It was the outbreak of the Seven Years' War. For eight years there had been peace; but Frederick, knowing that a web was

[1] Danzel, p. 329.

being woven for his ruin, and that he would soon be caught in its meshes, suddenly sprang forward to burst it asunder. Saxony he attacked first, and in a few days after he crossed the frontier his troops had seized Leipzig. Winkler's house was taken possession of by the Prussian officer appointed to be commandant of the town. It would have been better for Winkler to remain away from the scene of disaster, but he was thrown into a state of wild excitement and hurried back in hot haste. The idea of the tour was not, however, given up. During winter Lessing lived with Winkler, and never doubted that the summer of 1757 would be spent in England.

Leipzig was no longer merely a city of peaceful activity. Prussian officers, as little conciliatory in their bearing then as now, stalked through the streets; and the levy of nearly a million thalers gave the citizens other than political reasons for discontent. Deep and bitter was the general hatred of the invaders, and loud were the curses uttered by enraged patriots when no Prussian was within earshot. Rumours reached Lessing's friends in Berlin that he shared the common feeling, and he even got the credit of having written a pamphlet in which Frederick was fiercely assailed, and of which Heyne was the real author. But it was not his way to allow reason to be swayed by passion. Saxon as he was, he had always stood up for Frederick, and had published odes in his honour, which, if they are not very poetical, evidently express genuine admiration. He now defended the Prussian King, and associated as freely as he had done at Berlin with Prussian officers. Some of these he even took with him, in the spring of 1757, to the house where he and Winkler dined. Here the guests, with reckless disregard of digestion, usually indulged in furious denunciation of the common enemy. In the presence of Lessing's inconvenient friends they could not enjoy this pleasure, so that they began to go elsewhere for dinner. The landlady complained to Winkler, who, evidently tired of

his relation to one whose sympathies were so opposed to his own, took the opportunity to cut the cord which bound them to each other. In a curt note he announced that they must part, and directed Lessing at once to leave his house. Lessing, whose idea of a generous disposition was not that one should tamely submit to injustice, demanded compensation for this sudden violation of contract. Winkler refused, whereupon Lessing appealed to the law. In the long-run he won his suit, but not until nearly eight years had passed, and then three hundred of the six hundred thalers he obtained were swallowed up in legal expenses.

III.

Notwithstanding the excitement caused by the war, Lessing found it hard to pass the winter of 1756–57 pleasantly. "Your suspicion is right," he wrote to Mendelssohn;[1] "I am thoroughly bored in Leipzig." Even the prospect of going to England did not always console him. "How much rather," he says to Nicolai,[2] "should I spend next summer with you and our friend than in England. Perhaps I shall learn nothing there but that one may admire and hate a nation." He found time, however, to translate two books—Hutcheson's "System of Moral Philosophy," and, curiously enough, Law's "Serious Call." He also issued a translation of Thomson's plays, with an introduction, and in 1757 a translation of a work for the young by Richardson, including a selection Æsop's Fables.

Much more interesting than these hack performances is a remarkable correspondence he carried on with Nicolai and Mendelssohn.

Nicolai's early writings achieved so much success that he was encouraged to give up business and become a purely literary man. This he did for a time, although ultimately circumstances compelled him to resume his calling. In

[1] S. S. xii. p. 57.

[2] S. S. xii. p. 72.

view of his new career, he planned a periodical of rather large pretensions, in carrying on which he hoped to have the aid both of Lessing and Mendelssohn. It was entitled, "Library of the Liberal Arts." One of its main objects was to elevate and purify the national taste in connection with the drama, and for the first number Nicolai prepared an article on tragedy. Writing to him during the journey with Winkler, Lessing promised to send him some thoughts on the tragedy of middle-class life, apparently intended to be interwoven in this essay. The promise was not fulfilled; but Nicolai was not the less anxious to have the opinion of his friend on the treatise before it should be published. He accordingly enclosed, in a letter dated August 31, 1756, an extract from it, and about two months later, Lessing returned an answer containing a very full criticism. This was handed to Mendelssohn, whose interest was stirred; and thus arose a lively correspondence, which went on uninterruptedly for about six weeks.

The subject of the correspondence is the nature of tragedy. Nicolai maintained that tragedy is designed to excite a variety of passions, and that its different kinds may be classified according to the passions chiefly stirred. Thus we may say there are tragedies of terror, tragedies of pity, tragedies of admiration. Agreeing with Nicolai that the immediate purpose of tragedy is to call forth intense feeling, Lessing does not admit that it is designed to call forth different kinds of feeling; its sole intention, he maintains, is to awaken one particular passion—pity. Terror, in the strictest sense, he will not allow to have any place in the mind of the spectator; what is called terror is merely pity surprised by some danger by which the hero is threatened. Admiration, indeed, we do experience, but only as a subordinate element in the general scheme. Our pity, according to Lessing, is dependent upon two things: the good qualities of the person pitied, and the extent of his sufferings. In proportion as he is noble

and his misfortune is great, our pity for him is intense. Admiration, therefore, is necessarily stirred in tragedy; but it is stirred simply as a means of deepening pity. The epic, not tragedy, makes admiration its supreme end. The hero of the epic, like the hero of tragedy, may suffer, but his suffering is not so much designed to stir our pity as to give us occasion to admire his greatness of spirit in the midst of disaster.

It is an essential principle of Aristotle's theory of tragedy that the tragic hero shall neither be an utterly bad nor a perfectly good character. In the first case, says Aristotle, we feel that his sufferings are deserved, and have no pity for him: in the second, we feel, instead of pity, a sense of disgust; we are shocked that it should be possible for a man to be undeservedly overwhelmed with misfortune. Hence the tragic hero should stand between the two extremes. Lessing agrees that the woes of tragedy must be caused by some fault of the person who endures them, but on a wholly different ground from Aristotle. "Is it true," he asks,[1] "that the misfortune of an all too virtuous man awakens amazement and horror? If it is true, then amazement and horror must be the highest degree of pity: which they certainly are not. Pity, which grows in proportion to the perfection and the misfortune of its object, must cease to be pleasant to me, and become the more unpleasant the greater the perfection on the one hand and the misfortune on the other." The true reason why the tragic hero must not be blameless is this: "because without the fault which draws down the misfortune upon him his character and his misfortune would not make a *whole*, because the one would not be grounded in the other, and we should conceive each of these two elements apart from the other."[2]

As regards the ultimate end of tragedy, Nicolai rejected the doctrine he presumed to be that of Aristotle: that it is designed to exert upon us a high moral influence.

[1] S. S. xii. p. 81.

[2] S. S. xii. p. 81.

Apparently much to his surprise, as well as to that of Mendelssohn, Lessing took the opposite view. He insists that tragedy has a distinctly moral purpose. In reality, however, his doctrine simply is that, as a matter of fact, whether there is any such intention or not, true tragedy tends to elevate character. The best man, he maintains, is the man who feels pity most readily and most abundantly. Now tragedy, by exciting pity, deepens our capacity for it; and thus it enriches our moral nature.

The influence of Aristotle upon these speculations is obvious. Up to this time, however, he had known the "Poetics" merely from the translations of Dacier and Curtius. The discussion induced him to turn to the original, and to extend his studies to other works of Aristotle, especially the "Rhetoric" and "Ethics." For many years Lessing continued to study him with an earnestness which he applied to no other critical author; and there is hardly one of his later purely literary writings which is not more or less affected by his researches. His dramatic criticism, as we shall see, is altogether based upon Aristotle.

The first fruits of his studies we find in a hastily written letter to Nicolai, dated April 2, 1757, in which, after a pause, he resumed and closed the correspondence on the nature of tragedy.[1] Here he makes the important remark that φόβος ought not to be translated terror, as had almost always been done, but fear; and for Aristotle's idea of fear he refers Nicolai to the second and eighth chapters of the second book of the "Rhetoric." "Aristotle explains the word φόβος, which Herr Curtius translates most frequently *terror* (*Schrecken*), and Dacier now *terreur*, now *crainte*, through displeasure at an imminent evil, and says, fear is awakened in us by anything which, if we saw it in another, would awaken pity, and pity is awakened by anything which, if it threatened ourselves, would awaken fear." Thus enlightened, Lessing agrees

[1] S. S. xii. p. 93.

that fear has its place in the effect produced by tragedy; and he now holds that the aim of tragedy is not merely to exercise the faculty of pity, but through pity to purify the passions. This purifying influence he confines, in one part of his letter, to pity; he will not allow that Aristotle is right in ascribing it also to fear. Curiously enough, in a later paragraph he maintains a contrary opinion. "If tragedy can awaken pity, it can also, according to the above explanation, awaken fear; and it is a natural and necessary consequence of fear that the spectator should resolve to avoid the excesses of the passion which has plunged the hero whom he pities into misfortune."

It will be seen that Lessing had not yet attained to settled convictions on the subject, but was merely feeling his way. Meanwhile, however, it may be observed as highly characteristic, that soon after having completed "Miss Sara Sampson" he should be found striving after the deepest conceptions of tragedy. It was thus that creation and criticism were usually associated in Lessing. Having achieved any particular work, he made it the starting-point for speculation as to the ultimate ground of the class to which it belonged; on the other hand, if he formed a body of critical ideas, he was dissatisfied until he had applied them in actual artistic effort. The two impulses were equally spontaneous; they were perhaps, at first, equally deep. They were never quite dissociated, but in the long-run the critical impulse became the more powerful, and to it we owe the greater and more strictly original result.

IV.

In the spring of 1757, Major von Kleist joined the Prussian force at Leipzig. He was in delicate health, with some tendency to hypochondria; nevertheless, he felt intense enthusiasm for his profession, and longed for active service. Professional zeal did not, however, ex-

clude other interests. He placed but little importance on his poem on "Spring," but he had a true poetic impulse, and kept himself in living contact with the best literary movements of the time. He was as gentle and simple-hearted as he proved himself brave, so generous that his friends dared not accept half the good offices he would thrust upon them, full of loyal and fresh affection towards all those who were fortunate enough to win his love.

It will be remembered that when Lessing was in Potsdam writing "Miss Sara Sampson," Kleist expressed surprise in a letter to Gleim that he had not seen the young dramatist. It is possible that at that time, or soon afterwards, Lessing was slightly acquainted with him; but now, thrown together in circumstances in which the society of each was of the greatest benefit to the other, they became intimate friends. It is doubtful whether Lessing's friendship even with Mendelssohn was so close, and the source of such intense pleasure, as that with Kleist; but while the former relation lasted to the end of Lessing's life, the latter was snapt asunder by death after one short year of direct intercourse. Kleist was fourteen years older than Lessing, but so genial was his temper, and so active his imagination and intellect, that this long interval formed no barrier to the interchange of thought and sympathy.

Kleist stirred the surprise of his brother officers by seeking for no more exciting amusement than long walks in the country. When rallied on the subject, he made a reply which afterwards became famous among young poets: "In walking I am not idle, I go out hunting for images."[1] Lessing once said to him: "When you wish to refresh your mind, you take a walk in the country: I go to the coffee-house." No elaborate analysis of character could better mark the difference between the two men.

Weisse also knew Kleist very well; and so long as Lessing remained in Leipzig, the three often met. Kleist's rooms were the favourite rendezvous; and here they were

[1] Wahrheit und Dichtung, part ii. book 7.

sometimes joined by Von Brawe, a young nobleman studying at Leipzig, and of keen literary tastes. He was something of a philosopher, passionately fond of debate; and Lessing and he, Weisse says, would occasionally discuss so long and so hotly that it was necessary for the onlookers to turn the current of conversation by some jocular remark. However earnest in talk, Lessing always kept himself in restraint, and could without difficulty pass from serious to lighter moods.

Kleist's most intimate friend was the good-humoured and somewhat too effusive Gleim, whose works are now forgotten, but who in his barren epoch had the fame and honours of a great poet. Later in life he became the patron and friend of young writers, mistaking often the lustre of common glass for the flash of the diamond; and thus his praises were perhaps more loudly sounded than those of any other author of the time. Lessing had long been an object of suspicion to him, but when the two men were introduced—Gleim was the elder by ten years—he confessed in a letter to Bodmer that the severe critic had pleased him better than he had anticipated. Through Kleist Lessing was now brought into closer contact with him, although mainly by letter; and Gleim seems to have become gradually more and more impressed by the loftiness of aim, the mingled strength and gentleness, of one whose nature was in all its manifestations almost the opposite of his own. Many letters from this time passed between them. The first, dated April 2, 1757, shows us Lessing at Kleist's bedside, whence he writes in order to allay Gleim's fears as to their common friend, who was just recovering from a dangerous illness.

In the many letters Lessing wrote in the interval between his separation from Winkler and his return to Berlin, there is no trace of anxiety respecting outward needs. In reality, however, he passed through a time of intense and bitter anxiety, for there was now no theatre at Leipzig to write for, and the circumstances of the day were

not favourable to other forms of literary achievement. It is from the letters of his friends that we learn how severe was the pressure from which he suffered. "I am deeply sorry," writes Sulzer to Kleist, in a letter dated May 22, 1757, "that a man like Lessing should still be troubled about the means of living, and that even the little he requires is impossible for him." On the 8th of May Kleist had written to Gleim: "Try hard to obtain for him in your neighbourhood a position in the Council of War, or some other convenient office; he will soon learn the duties, for he is clever." Less than a week later the same sympathetic friend says to Gleim: "In the Palace Library at Berlin there is a very old librarian who must soon die or want an assistant, and Sack ought to exert himself to procure this post for Lessing. Write about it immediately to Sack and Sulzer. It would be wrong to lose Herr Lessing a second time from our country for want of an income." Nearly a year afterwards, when Lessing was about to leave Leipzig, his position was still more painful, for on April 27, 1758, Kleist again writes to Gleim: "Work with me to obtain for our dear Lessing some post. He is greatly to be pitied. I have seen none of my friends in such a position."[1] So utter was his need that he had to compel himself to accept aid from both Mendelssohn and Kleist.

During part of this time Lessing occupied himself a good deal with Burke's recently published "Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful," a translation of which, with criticisms, he intended to publish. The scheme, however, was never carried out, probably because the more closely he examined the work, the less fruitful did he find its leading principles. In a letter to Mendelssohn, he commends it as containing many materials which a thinker might turn to profitable account, but at the same time will give its "philosophising" no higher praise than that it is "very *commode*."

[1] Danzel, p. 331.

Nicolai, foiled in his efforts to secure the publication of his "Library" in Berlin, asked Lessing to obtain for him a Leipzig publisher. This was done; and while Lessing remained in Leipzig he attended to the printing of the successive numbers, and occasionally introduced changes in the proofs. One contribution he made which attracted general notice. Amid the stir of feeling produced by the war, it was inevitable that a great many war-songs should be written. For the most part, these productions were remarkable only for their patriotic fervour; but two lyrics by Gleim, which fell into Lessing's hands, had genuine merit. They were nominally by a Prussian grenadier in active service, and really breathed the spirit of one who delighted in the fire and stir of battle. Lessing printed them in the "Library," accompanying them by a brief preface; and they so far interested him that he was induced to enter upon a comprehensive study of the war-songs of all periods.

The only other contribution of any importance was a review of a miserably inefficient translation of Theokritus. The tone of the article was so severe that Nicolai expostulated with him. "I wonder," replied Lessing,[1] "that my review should appear to *you* too severe. . . . In regard to ancient authors I am a true knight-errant; it enrages me to see them so pitifully ill-treated."

In order to encourage dramatic talent, Nicolai offered a prize for the best tragedy which should be sent to him, promising to publish it and the next best in the "Library." The prize was awarded to "Codrus," a tragedy —which long held the stage—by a young writer, Von Cronegk, who died before the decision was arrived at. The second place was awarded to a drama by Brawe, the Leipzig student with whom Lessing discussed philosophy in Kleist's rooms. Lessing took much interest in the progress of the latter work, and himself despatched it to Nicolai. For a time he himself thought of competing,

[1] S. S. xii. p. 128.

and actually made some progress with a tragedy, which he recast and completed many years afterwards, and which, in the opinion of some critics, takes the highest rank among his writings: "Emilia Galotti." "There is a young man here," he wrote to Mendelssohn on October 22, 1757,[1] "working at a tragedy, which might perhaps be the best of all, if he could devote a couple of months more to it."

On January 21, 1758, when "Codrus" had been proclaimed best, he says to Nicolai, after proposing that there should be a fresh competition:[2] "Meanwhile, my young dramatist would be ready, of whom, in my vanity, I foretell a great deal that is good, for he works very much as I do. Every seven days he writes seven lines; he extends his plan incessantly, and incessantly strikes out parts of what he has completed. His present subject is a domestic Virginia, to whom he has given the name of Emilia Galotti. He has separated the history of the Roman Virginia from everything that makes her interesting to the whole State; he believes that the fate of a daughter slain by a father, to whom her virtue is more precious than her life, is tragic enough and capable enough of shaking the whole soul, even if it is not followed by the overthrow of the State constitution. His plan is in three acts, and he uses without scruple all the freedoms of the English stage. I will not tell you more; but so much is certain, I could myself wish to have hit upon his idea of the subject. It seems to me so beautiful that I should doubtless never have worked it out, so as not to spoil it."

It was the tendency of scholars in the eighteenth century to look with contempt upon mediæval literature. Like Gothic architecture—in which, by the way, Lessing himself could see no excellence—it was usually condemned as the monstrous production of semi-barbarians. No work was deemed of permanent beauty or value which was not the offspring of Greek or Latin civilisation, or which had

[1] S. S. xii. p. 121. [2] S. S. xii. p. 128.

not originated in the age of modern enlightenment. In Germany an exception was found to this rule in the Swiss School, which persistently sought to awaken the national intelligence to a sense of the worth of the treasures that had for centuries been utterly neglected. At a much later period the Romantic School, headed by the Schlegels, took up the task which was only partly executed, and whose real importance was only dimly perceived, by their enthusiastic but half-informed predecessors. Now every European nation has dug deeply into its past literary history, and whether worthless or not, the smallest attempt of mediæval writers at artistic expression is brought to light. It would be difficult to overrate the importance of this movement. It has not only widened our conceptions of the many possible modes in which intellectual life may reveal itself; it has deepened in each of the European peoples the sense of the continuity of its history, and given increased reality and freshness to its loyalty to the past.

Lessing, who was always on the outlook for new points of view, had deeper insight than the Swiss writers themselves into the immense significance of their labours, and during the latter part of his residence in Leipzig devoted almost his whole time to the study of early German writers. Excusing himself, in a letter to Mendelssohn, dated April 2, 1758, for not writing sooner, he says:[1] "I have been once more deep in work in which I was unwilling to be in any way interrupted. You know me, and I know myself; I must try to act upon the first heat if I wish to bring anything to perfection. . . . The subjects about which you have written to me, and about which I have had to answer you, are so wholly different, that this time, dearest friend, I have necessarily looked upon letters to you or Herr Nicolai as a distraction." Further on in the same letter he reveals the nature of the occupation about which he thus writes, but in a tone adapted to one from whom he knows he can expect no sympathy. He

[1] S. S. xii. p. 139.

promises to respond to some philosophical ideas Mendelssohn had been expounding, "so soon as he shall again have approached the spheres of truth." "At present," he adds, "I am roving in the spheres of historical uncertainty, and you would not believe what a mass of worthless trifles fills my head. The sole advantage I shall bring away will be that I shall have learned the old Swabian German, and shall be able to read with greater ease the poems the Swiss are making known."

The particular work to which he alluded was an essay on the "Heldenbuch," which he never published, but which is now included among his posthumous writings. It is rather the outline of a discussion than a finished treatise; and its theories are of a kind that could only have been broached in the infancy of this department of criticism. But it indicates intimate knowledge of mediæval history, and the studies of which it was one of the results exercised very considerable influence in determining the objects at which he aimed in some of his later writings.

V.

But for his lawsuit Lessing would probably have left Leipzig immediately after his break with Winkler. It seemed, however, desirable to be on the spot while that progressed, and there are a good many references to it in his letters, some of them expressing hope of a speedy and favourable issue. At last it became evident that there might be tedious delays, and when, in the spring of 1758, Kleist was summoned to take charge of a military hospital erected after the battle of Rossbach, Lessing felt that the only link which connected him with Leipzig was broken, and resolved to return to Berlin. On the 5th of May, Kleist announced to Gleim that on the 4th their friend had started for the Prussian capital with the bookseller Voss, having put off his journey for a day in the hope of greeting Gleim, who was expected at the

Fair. We may believe that Lessing was sincerely sorry to part from the friend with whom he had spent so many pleasant hours; fortunately, we are not left to guess what were Kleist's feelings. Day after day had revealed to him new phases of Lessing's deep and frank nature, and he had felt himself, in weakness and depression, consoled and stimulated by their friendship. "In the year I have spent at Leipzig," he wrote to Gleim, "I have become so accustomed to him, and he has become so dear to me, that I feel as if he were dead, or rather as if I were half dead." A few days later he asked the same friend, with whom he was depositing 1200 thalers, to divide 200 of them between Lessing and Ramler in case he should fall in battle. "Or rather," he added, "give the money to them now, and if I live they may return it to me when they are rich enough:" which was the kind-hearted soldier's way of forcing a gift on sensitive men sorely in need of help.

CHAPTER VIII.

THIRD RESIDENCE IN BERLIN.

I.

LESSING was heartily welcomed back to Berlin by his friends Mendelssohn, Nicolai, and Ramler; and with all three his intercourse now became more constant than at any previous time. They met daily, and whenever they came together their conversation invariably rose above the small details that occupy the talk of ordinary men. Lessing was fond of fun and banter, so that any one who spent an hour with him felt it hard work to be dull and lifeless; but his thoughts played around so many subjects, he was so invariably striving to penetrate beneath appearances to the ultimate meaning of things, that conversation in which he took part always tended to become discussion, and there was not one of his friends who did not owe to his personal influence many of their most fruitful ideas. "His conversation," wrote Mendelssohn in a letter with which Karl Lessing concludes the biography of his brother, "was a rich fountain from which one incessantly drew new ideas of the beautiful and the good: ideas which he scattered about him like common water for every one's use. The liberality with which he communicated his opinions caused me sometimes to be in danger of misunderstanding the service, for it seemed to give him no trouble; and sometimes he so intermingled my thoughts with his that I was no longer able to distinguish them. His liberality in this respect was not like that of narrow-minded rich people, who cause it to be felt that they are

dealing out charity. He spurred individual activity and made one deserve what he gave."

Had he chosen, Lessing could easily have made himself at this time the head of a literary school. It was the fashion of the age for young writers to gather around some distinguished man, to act as the champions of his doctrines, and while trumpeting his name to catch a little reflected glory from his greatness. The more intimate of Lessing's friends would have been much pleased to play this part with respect to him, for he was not only already well known to the German public, but high expectations had been formed as to the mark he would make in future. Of all things, however, that which he most deeply disliked was a clique. He knew well that, however fresh may be its conceptions at starting, it invariably ends in intellectual barrenness, repeating the same parrot cry with wearisome iteration, and fancying that in its petty formulæ it has caught and imprisoned the universe. Nothing could be more repugnant to all the deepest needs and tendencies of his intellectual life. Room for free movement he felt to be absolutely essential; he had no sooner mastered one position than he sought to rise from it to another and higher. Hence, during his whole career, he kept himself studiously apart from every kind of association that could have even the remote appearance of a school.[1]

Deeply as his Berlin friends loved and admired him, they were never quite able to hit it off with one who was so far removed from the usual types of character. They were all, in the most rigid sense of the term, strictly respectable; punctual men of business; models of practical wisdom and propriety. Lessing was very different. With a sense of order that gave a certain regularity of its own to his work, he did not care to fall into the habits that

[1] "I hate from the bottom of my heart," he once wrote to his brother, "all people who wish to found sects. For not error, but sectarian error causes the unhappiness of man; yes, even sectarian truth would cause it, if truth could be supposed to found a sect."

controlled other people. He would stroll into a wine cellar at times when his friends were diligently at duty, and thought everybody else ought to be so; and he almost invariably, as we have seen, delayed doing what he confessed he ought to do at once. There was, in short, a considerable dash of the Bohemian in him. It was not a Bohemianism that in any way interrupted the development of his most serious convictions; but it was decided enough to puzzle his associates, and to call forth from them sometimes expostulations which indicate a pleasing consciousness of moral superiority.

With Ramler he undertook, soon after his return, a joint literary labour. This was the issuing of a volume of epigrams selected from the enormous number written by Logau, a satirist of the seventeenth century already named, all but forgotten in the eighteenth. The text was to be accompanied by an introduction and a rather full dictionary of obsolete terms used by the writer. "Herr Ramler and I," wrote Lessing to Gleim (July 8, 1758[1]), "form project after project. Only wait quarter of a century, and you will be amazed at the quantity we shall have written." The exemplary Ramler, however, felt one experience of the kind more than enough. Lessing's part of the common labour was to provide the introduction and dictionary. The latter he seems to have completed in good time, but for the former his associate waited week after week in vain. "Poor Logau!" he complained to Gleim (April 20, 1759[2]); "the Fair is here, and no introduction is as yet forthcoming. If Herr Lessing does not bring it to-day, I shall never again print anything with him, unless he has everything ready before printing begins. To the very last hour! Is not that too provoking for me, who am a Prussian, and consequently rather accurate? Yet I cannot take it very ill in our friend; he has ten irons in the fire at once."

At last the work appeared, and ever since Logau has

[1] Sämmtliche Schriften, xii. p. 143. [2] Danzel, p. 373.

held an honourable place among German writers. The introduction sets forth the few facts known respecting him, and sharply defines the excellences of his style. The dictionary is of more importance, and proves how high was Lessing's conception of the manner in which work of this kind ought to be done. The absence of any attempt at etymology deprives it of what, had it been compiled in the present day, would have been its main interest; but the definitions are keen and terse. In his introduction, Lessing expresses the belief that the compilation of similar dictionaries in connection with all the chief writers of former times would be the most effectual step towards the preparation of a general dictionary of the German language.

Among other undertakings in 1758, he issued the last volume of his "Theatrical Library:" a volume not essentially distinguished from its predecessors. He also saw through the press a collection of the war-songs written by Gleim in the character of "an old grenadier," and accompanied them with a brief but scholarlike preface.

Some of Gleim's later lyrics did not satisfy Lessing so well as the two he had introduced to the public in Nicolai's "Library." They were not only animated and vigorous, but full of bitter invective of the enemies of Prussia, and calculated to excite enduring hatred. Lessing's humane and disciplined spirit could not but be shocked by such explosions of violent feeling; and we find him (December 16, 1758) thus expostulating with his friend: "Suppose that peace is sooner or later concluded, suppose that the Powers which now so detest each other make up their quarrels (which must inevitably happen)—what do you think cooler readers, and perhaps the Grenadier himself, will say to the many exaggerations which in the heat of passion you now take for undoubted truths? The patriot cries down the poet too much; and a military patriot, too, who supports himself by pretexts which are anything but proved! Perhaps in me also the patriot is not quite stifled, although the praise of a zealous patriot is the last

which, according to my way of thinking, I should desire to win: a patriot, that is, who should teach me to forget that I ought to be a citizen of the world." [1]

Gleim was too much under the influence of the rage of the hour to appreciate these calm counsels, and seems to have responded with some heat. Lessing replied: "Explain, dearest friend, to our Grenadier the letter which has given so much offence. If I wrote that I began to fear for him, I regret only that I could not in writing adopt the tone and manner in which I should have spoken. Otherwise, he would certainly have understood me better. I was unable to bring in some laughable idea at the end of my letter, with the serious beginning of which I was not satisfied. What I said about excessive patriotism was nothing more than a general remark, suggested to me not so much by the Grenadier as by a thousand extravagant speeches to which I am obliged to listen here every day. I have no idea of the love of country (I am sorry I must confess to you what is perhaps my shame), and at best it appears to me a heroic weakness which I can very well do without." [2]

Nothing Lessing ever wrote has tried the loyalty of his German admirers like these few sentences. "No idea of the love of country!" "A heroic weakness which I can very well do without!" It has seemed impossible that Lessing, of all men, should have said anything so opposed to the later sentiment of his countrymen; and some writers have tried to escape from the difficulty by supposing that he was alluding, not to Germany, but only to his native State, Saxony. His words will not bear this interpretation. Their clear meaning is that he had no greater love for Germany than for any other land; that he was interested in Germans, as in Frenchmen or Italians, only as men.

It would, however, be unfair to judge any great writer by two or three phrases, especially when, as in the present

[1] S. S. xii. p. 150. [2] S. S. xii. p. 152.

instance, they are dashed off in reply to wild extravagance. They must be to some extent corrected by reference to the whole tenor of his works. Looking impartially at Lessing's life, we should say that in a certain large sense no German of his time was more thoroughly patriotic. It was a source of bitter regret to him that his country was in many respects so far behind other nations; and he especially deplored its tendency to distrust its own powers and to imitate foreign models. The task of his career was to awaken it to a sense of its greatness, and to encourage it to escape from every trammel that hampered its inward life. Surely this was to fulfil in the highest possible way patriotic duty.

With a large class of persons patriotism means blindness to the faults of one's country. According to these, the nation in which one happens to have been born must be painted in glowing colours, and love for it must be accompanied by a certain amount of jealousy of its rivals. In this sense Lessing was indeed utterly without patriotism. His desire was always to see things as they were, and, although he loved Germany, he would never stoop to flatter her. Nor was he capable, because he loved her, of looking upon other countries with distrust and indifference. No nation is what it is in virtue of its own energies; it is borne onwards on the general stream of humanity, and to humanity owes its best and greatest influences. Any one who deeply realises this truth is necessarily a cosmopolitan, and from Lessing's mind it was never long absent. We may perhaps say that his cosmopolitanism lay at the root of his patriotism, for a nation pays its debt to the world best by remaining true to the laws of its own being. In serving his country as he did, therefore, Lessing was most wisely serving mankind.

II.

Soon after Lessing went back to Berlin, Nicolai resumed the life of a bookseller, the business his father had established having, by the death of his brother, fallen to him. He felt that it would not be convenient for him to edit a periodical which he did not publish; accordingly the "Library" was handed over to Weisse in Leipzig, who thenceforward conducted it. Nicolai, however, was still anxious to be engaged in some enterprise which should influence the thought of his time; and he, Lessing, and Mendelssohn often discussed the possibility of starting a new organ of public opinion. The difficulties in the way were so great that the three friends had reluctantly to decide that a regular periodical like the "Library" was beyond their reach. But one day, in November, 1758, when Lessing and Nicolai were talking about a book which had just appeared, and respecting which they had a great deal to say to each other, the thought flashed upon Nicolai: why not express in the form of letters, and without binding themselves to any fixed method or time of publication, such thoughts as they were then uttering? He communicated the idea to Lessing, who at once saw its significance, and soon suggested a complete scheme. In order to connect the letters with the actual movements of the time, he proposed that they should be addressed to a soldier supposed to be wounded in the war; and as nothing was more probable than that Kleist would be wounded—which he ultimately was—Lessing thought it would be well to write as if the criticisms were really intended for him. He proposed, however, that they should confine themselves to such works as had appeared since the outbreak of the war, and look forward to the conclusion of the series when peace should be established.

Lessing's ideas were adopted, and in January, 1759, the first letter appeared. The series was called "Letters relating to the most recent literature" ("Briefe, die neueste Litteratur betreffend"), and is now generally

known by the shorter title, "The Literary Letters" ("Die Litteraturbriefe"). So long as Lessing remained in Berlin at this time, he wrote the great majority of the articles, making use of a variety of signatures; and although each of his two friends had a style of his own, they caught his spirit, so that his influence is felt even in the treatment of subjects he would not himself have dealt with. His authorship was suspected by a good many readers who had learned to recognise his vivid, manly style; but he never openly acknowledged his connection with the undertaking, and not until after his death were the facts now recorded fully understood.

Of all the works we have passed in review, not one can be said to have wrought any vital change or to be still a living force in literature. These letters, however, fragmentary as they are, have played a splendid part in the spiritual development of Germany, and to this day they are looked upon as an essential factor in the culture of every educated German. If we pass suddenly from even the best of his early writings to these, we seem to leap into a wholly new world. It is true we find the same penetrating insight, the same passion for mingled strength and clearness, the same solidity of idea and vivacity of manner in the one as in the other; but in the "Vindications," in the contributions to the "Voss Gazette," in the "Vade Mecum for Herr S. G. Lange," these qualities are only in blossom; here they have ripened into rich fruit. We see at a glance that his mind has derived fresh elasticity from the anxieties he has battled against and conquered; that much thought and reading have given increased firmness to the step that never faltered, additional force to the grasp that was always strong and sure. And it is impossible not to feel the influence of the events in the midst of which the letters were written. The pulse of the Prussian people was throbbing with feverish rapidity; the nation, aroused by the titanic struggle in which its king was sounding with it deeps of which it had not before dreamed, scaling heights which would once have seemed

far beyond its vision, was in a mood for audacious feats, longed for bold and swift strokes. Cosmopolitan as he was, Lessing could not escape the prevailing temper; and in any case it was necessary for him to address the public in the only tones to which they were disposed to listen. The "Literary Letters" must, therefore, be regarded as in one sense the direct outcome of the Seven Years' War. Although indifferent to German literature, Frederick was in spite of himself breathing life into the sole work of the day which was destined to go down with honour to posterity.

One peculiarity of these "Letters" is that we never lose sight of the author in his work; and this is true of all his later critical writings. On every line we feel the impress of his personality. In precision of statement and in logical method one of the most scientific of writers, he has none of the abstractness, none of the remoteness from human sympathy, which usually mark scientific exposition. Although he knows precisely before he starts the goal towards which he proposes to advance, he does not make for it by the shortest cut; he moves along the winding paths by which he has himself originally reached it. With a work of his in our hands, we are in presence of a living man, not of a mere book; one who has before him as he writes the living men into whose minds he desires to cast seed from the harvest that has slowly ripened in his own. This is one chief source of the eternal charm of Lessing's criticism. It has the quickening influence of the spoken rather than of the written word.

The "Letters" have to some extent a connection with the "Library" which had passed under Weisse's control. Lessing repeatedly alludes to it, and makes its decisions the starting-point of some of his best speculations. His method is, however, essentially different from the method of that periodical and of all the other critical attempts of the time. The ordinary critic, then as now, had a

ready-made apparatus of critical rules, which he applied to every achievement that came before him. If it was in accordance with these, the work passed muster; if it departed from them, it was condemned. Now, Lessing was certainly as far as possible from approving of lawlessness in literature. It was one of the objects of his life to convince his nation that no work can ever rise to classical rank which does not strictly conform to law. But the law to which he would compel obedience was not a rigid code of regulations; it was a law which recognised the free aspirations of the human spirit, which admitted that the manifestations of each age, if they are true and spring from deep life, must move on different lines from the manifestations of all other ages. Hence his sympathy was large enough to acknowledge excellence in many forms; he could detect the inward harmony of many variations on the same theme.

The authors of the "Library" had often been condemned for the severity of their judgments on the works they criticised. Lessing supports them by reference to a larger principle than any that had ever occurred to themselves. "The goodness of a work depends not upon individual beauties; these individual beauties must make a beautiful whole, or the connoisseur cannot read them otherwise than with angry displeasure. Only when the whole is found to be blameless must the critic refrain from an injurious analysis, and regard the work as the philosopher regards the world. But if the whole does not produce a pleasant impression, if I clearly see that the artist has begun to work without himself knowing what he wishes to do, then one must not be so good-natured, and overlook an ugly face for the sake of a beautiful hand, a hump for the sake of a charming foot. And that our authors have very properly seldom done this: therein consists their whole severity. Sometimes they have done it, and to me they do not seem nearly severe enough."[1]

[1] S. S. vi. p. 39.

The tone of Lessing was far more decided, and even stern; and it was fully justified by the needs of the time. Crowds of writers competed for public favour, but only here and there did any one indicate a suspicion that literature is something great and difficult, whose rewards are to be won only by the strong and disciplined. Mild and soothing criticism would, therefore, have been worthless. The atmosphere was too oppressive to be cleared by softly-falling showers; it needed tempests of wind and rain.

III.

In the first letter Lessing strikes the keynote of the whole series, for he complains in almost bitter terms of the absolute lack of great names in contemporary German literature. "Against a hundred names—and a hundred does not include all—which have become known in this war as the names of meritorious heroes; against a thousand bold deeds which have happened before your eyes, in which you have taken part, which were causes of the most unexpected changes: I cannot name to you a single new man of genius; I can cite only a very few works of authors already known which would deserve to be preserved by posterity with those deeds. This is true of us Germans more than of all others. War has, indeed, erected among us her most bloody stage; and it is an old complaint that the noise of weapons frightens away the Muses. If they are frightened away from a land where they have not very many or very enthusiastic friends, where in any case they have not met with the best reception, they may remain away frightened for a long time. Peace will come again without them: a sad peace, accompanied by the single melancholy pleasure that we may weep over our lost possessions."[1]

The three following letters deal with translations of

[1] S. S. vi. p. 4.

Pope, Gay, and Bolingbroke; and Lessing's readers were probably astonished to find that in these and subsequent articles he treated translation, not as the mere hack work it was generally considered, but as a task of extreme difficulty and importance. Having had great experience in translation, he knew the obstacles against which translators must contend and the temptations to which they are exposed. He was very severe on the shortcomings of those whose renderings he reviewed, and denounced them for seldom understanding the language they undertook to interpret. Their motive, he asserted, was usually to exercise themselves in a language they wished to learn; "and," he adds, "they are clever enough to get paid for their exercises."

The effect of these criticisms was most salutary. A higher idea of the value of good translation, and of the conditions on which alone it can be achieved, was diffused through the reading world of Germany; and at this moment there is no country so richly supplied with scholarlike renderings from all the cultivated languages.

One of the translators whose blunders Lessing most mercilessly exposed—Dusch—was also an original writer, and in the seventy-seventh letter he is taken to task for a common fault of professional authors: his fatal productiveness in connection with all sorts of subjects. "Herr Dusch wrote, writes, and will write, so long as he can receive quills from Hamburg: 'lapdogs' and 'poems;' love temples and slanders; at one time Northern, at another General, magazines; at one time candid, at another moral, at another love letters; at one time descriptions, at another translations; translations now from English, now from Latin.

'Monstrum nulla virtute redemptum!'

O the polygraph! With him all criticism is in vain. One should almost hesitate to criticise him, for the smallest criticism directed against him gives him occasion and

material for a new book. Does the critic thus become a sharer of his sins?"[1]

In a previous article, divided into three letters, Lessing had carefully estimated the claims of a book by this author entitled "Descriptions from the Realm of Nature and Ethics." Nature had been so often described according to the seasons that Dusch, resolved at all hazards to be original, chose to describe her as she appears in each successive month. "According to the month!" says Lessing. "A bold, happy idea! But where, may I ask, does Nature know this division into months? Is one month as distinguished from another as one season from another? What images, what scenes, occur in one particular month and in no other? And if the same images and scenes may occur in more than one month, what sufficient reason has the writer for showing them to us in one rather than in another?" A passage is then quoted from Pope, whose works Dusch had translated, in which the English poet urges this objection against the same method as adopted by Spenser in his "Eclogues." "If," continues Lessing, "Herr Dusch is, as they say, the translator of Pope's collected works, it is all the more surprising that he did not recall this remark of his hero. If he had done so, we should not have read, *mutatis mutandis*, of so many of his subjects: —The beautiful rose does not yet bloom!—Now blooms the beautiful rose!—Now the beautiful rose has bloomed!"[2]

The remaining part of the criticism is devoted to showing the extreme indebtedness of Herr Dusch to other writers, his tautology, misstatement of facts, confusion of figures, and general pretentiousness. At great length, and with keen satirical humour, the narrative of a preposterous dream, intended to be full of philosophical significance, is examined; and never was soaring ambition more humiliatingly brought low. In concluding his criticism Lessing gives Herr Dusch the following advice:—"He might really have become a good author if he had confined himself to

[1] S. S. vi. p. 189. [2] S. S. vi. p. 93.

suitable spheres. And these the authors of the 'Library' have clearly enough indicated to him. Herr Dusch has not wit and imagination enough to be a poet, nor enough penetration and thoroughness to be a philosopher. Of both, however, he has something: almost as much as is necessary to the composition of a tolerable didactic poem. Let him write this, and not be misled either by his friends or his vanity into undertaking works *de longue haleine* which demand plan, invention, and self-restraint!"

Dusch was naturally stirred to anger by this plain speech; but being a man of some good sense, he thought over the rebukes and counsels administered to him, and in the end produced precisely such a poem as that for which Lessing had declared his capacities fitted him.

In no department of literature has Germany produced, during the present century, more works of first-rate importance than in history; but when the "Literary Letters" were written, it could not boast of a single good historian. In a few honest words Lessing explains this striking defect. "Our clever writers are seldom scholars, and our scholars are seldom clever writers. The former will not read, will not turn up authorities, will not collect, in short, will not work; the latter will do nothing else but this. The former are deficient in materials, the latter in ability to give shape to their materials."[1] After condemning writers who, in telling the story of past ages, fill up gaps in the evidence by their own fancies, he maintains that "the name of a true historian is due only to one who describes the history of his own times and of his own land." This dictum has met with much approval, and, in a period when all kinds of dry researches were preferred to subjects of living interest, it was not without value; but a principle which would exclude Gibbon from the list of "true historians" can hardly be considered beyond dispute.

In one of the letters Lessing begins by seriously reminding his correspondent that a few years before a small

[1] S. S. vi. p. 140.

library had been discovered at Herculaneum. "A scholar of Naples," he adds,[1] "has succeeded in making out one of the Greek manuscripts, and, as fortune would have it, it turns out to be the *Ερωτοπαίγνια* of Alciphron. Herr von Q., who now lives in Naples, has had the opportunity of copying a piece from it, which he has sent to Germany. Here it has fallen into the hands of one of our best poets, who has found it so excellent that he has made the following translation." Some very graceful verses are then quoted; and Lessing continues: "Now, what do you say to *this*? Oh, you are enchanted! 'what lovely little verses! Never did a poet more exalt his maiden! Nothing can be finer; nothing more tender! Oh, the Greeks, the Greeks!'" "Moderate your delight," he suddenly adds. "I have imposed upon you. The scholar in Naples has made out nothing; Alciphron wrote no *Ερωτοπαίγνια*; what you have read is not translated from the Greek, it is the original work of a German. Why, I hear you ask, have I imposed upon you? For this reason—would I have excited your curiosity if I had merely written to you: In Leipzig four small sheets have recently appeared with the title 'Love Poems?' 'Love Poems!' you would have exclaimed. 'Why do we Germans so willingly do what we are least fitted for?' In vain should I have added: but they are pretty love poems; you will find the author upon a quite original path; they are worthy of a Gresset! At most you would have believed me, and therewith remained satisfied."

Lessing could not more effectually have attacked the tendency to exalt the remote merely because it is remote, and to pass by real excellence for no other reason than that it is at hand.

The writer whose general merit he thus praises he blames for the lack of local colour in a poem called "The Song of a Moor." "The Song of a Moor! And the Moor is hardly anywhere to be found except in the title. Alter the single 'black maid' and the 'cedar woods,' and a Calmuck might

[1] S. S. vi. p. 69.

sing it as well as a Moor."[1] In this respect the song is contrasted with "The Song of a Laplander" by Kleist. "Here we everywhere see the scene in which the song is sung, everywhere the man who sings it." Thus Lessing first distinctly stated in Germany the now familiar principle that it is possible for the poet to depict the qualities which underlie every variety of human nature, and at the same time to be true to the minute peculiarities which distinguish one variety from another.

The mention of "The Song of a Laplander" reminds him of a real Lapland song which Kleist appeared to have imitated; and this, again, of the translation of a few popular Lithuanian songs he had recently read. He quotes two of them in illustration of his conviction, "that poets are born under every sky, and that lively sentiments are no privilege of the cultured races." One of them is the lament of a young bride who is about to say farewell to her mother, and has touches of quiet and artless pathos. The translator had apologised for troubling his readers with "such vanities." Lessing says there ought rather to have been an apology because more of them were not translated. His appreciation of verses of this kind indicates how far he had advanced beyond the position not only of the formal Court poets, but of the anakreontic versifiers in whose footsteps he had himself walked. He was already in full sympathy with the movement which in England led to the publication of Percy's "Reliques," and in Germany to the enthusiasm of Herder and Goethe for every form of poetry that had sprung directly from the heart of the people. The marked manner in which he drew attention to the Lithuanian songs is also an indication of his belief that the genius of each race brings forth its best products only when it works according to the laws of its own nature, expressing without affectation the ideas and sympathies excited by immediate contact with the facts of life.

[1] S. S. vi. p. 73.

As might have been anticipated, Lessing carried on with increased vigour his crusade against Gottsched, whose influence had not yet wholly died out. "Nobody," said the "Library,"[1] "will deny that the German stage has to thank Herr Professor Gottsched for a great part of its first improvements." "I am this nobody," says Lessing in the seventeenth letter; "I deny it wholly. It were to be wished that Herr Gottsched had never had anything to do with the theatre. His pretended improvements either relate to superfluous trifles or have been thoroughly injurious."

This letter is the most famous of the collection, and at once attracted general attention. The following is the essential part of it:—"While Frau Neuber flourished, and many a one felt a call to deserve well of her and of the stage, our dramatic poetry was in a pitiful condition. No rules were known; no one troubled himself about models. Our tragedies were full of nonsense, bombast, filth, and the wit of the mob. Our comedies consisted of disguises and enchantments, and blows were their wittiest ideas. To see their corruption it was not necessary to be the finest and greatest spirit. And Herr Gottsched was not the first who saw it; he was only the first who had confidence in his own power to remove it. And how did he set to work? He understood a little French, and began to translate; every one who could rhyme and understand 'Oui, monsieur,' he encouraged also to translate. With scissors and paste, as a Swiss critic says, he manufactured his 'Cato;' he caused the 'Darius' and the 'Oysters,' the 'Elise' and the 'Dandy in the Lawsuit,' the 'Aurelius' and the 'Witling,' the 'Banise' and the 'Hypochondriac' to be made without scissors and paste; he laid his ban upon extemporising; he caused harlequin to be formally banished from the theatre, itself the greatest harlequinade ever played; in short, he would not so much improve our old theatre as be the creator of a quite new one. And what sort of new one? A theatre after the French

[1] S. S. vi. p. 40.

fashion: without examining whether a theatre in the French fashion would be suitable in Germany or not.

"From our old dramatic pieces which he rejected, he might have remarked that we strike in rather with the English than with the French taste; that in our tragedies we wish to see and think more than the timid French tragedy gives us occasion to see or think; that the great, the terrible, the melancholy, affects us better than the coy, the tender, the loving; that too great simplicity tries us more than too great complexity, &c. He had but to follow this track to be conducted by a straight path to the English theatre. Do not say that he sought also to make use of this, as his 'Cato' proves. For precisely this, that he considers Addison's 'Cato' the best English tragedy, shows clearly that he here saw with the eyes of the French, and did not know Shakespeare, Jonson, Beaumont and Fletcher, &c., whom afterwards his pride would not permit him to learn to know.

"If the masterpieces of Shakespeare, with some modest changes, had been translated, I am convinced that better consequences would have followed than could follow from acquaintance with Corneille and Racine. In the first place, the people would have taken far more pleasure in the former than they can take in the latter; and in the second place, the former would have awakened quite different minds among us from those whom the latter have awakened. For genius can only be kindled by genius: and most easily by a genius which seems to have to thank nature for everything, and does not frighten us away by the tedious perfections of art.

"Even if we decide the matter by the examples of the ancients, Shakespeare is a far greater tragical poet than Corneille: although the latter knew the ancients very well, and the former hardly at all. Corneille comes nearer them in mechanical arrangement, Shakespeare in what is essential. The Englishman almost always attains the end of tragedy, however strange and peculiar are the ways

he selects; the Frenchman scarce ever attains it, although he treads the paths beaten by the ancients. After the 'Œdipus' of Sophokles, no piece in the world can have more power over our passions than 'Othello,' 'King Lear,' 'Hamlet,' &c. Has Corneille a single tragedy that has moved you half as much as the 'Zayre' of Voltaire? And how far is 'Zayre' inferior to the 'Moor of Venice,' a weak copy of which it is, and from which the whole character of Orosman has been borrowed!"

Lessing was undoubtedly somewhat unjust to Gottsched. It is true that the literary sympathies of Germans are much more closely allied to those of the English than to those of the French, for here, as elsewhere, the subtle influence of race makes itself felt. But for this very reason it was desirable that in awaking to new life Germany should in the first instance follow the guidance rather of France than England. Her prime necessity, while Gottsched was still deemed a great man, was that she should learn not to confound wild irregularity with force; that she should attain to the conception of order and calm in literary effort. The free and passionate poetry of England was not so well fitted to convey this essential lesson as the more measured literature of France; and although Gottsched was a very unintelligent guide, and fell into the fatal blunder that if poets have a proper system of rules they can afford to do without a powerful imaginative impulse, he at any rate impressed his contemporaries with the belief that imaginative impulse is not alone a sufficient equipment for writers who aim at the highest effects.

When the "Literary Letters" were being written, however, everything that Gottsched had to teach had been sufficiently proclaimed. This was proved by the fact that all who acknowledged his sway seemed doomed to literary barrenness; under his influence poetry had become tame and meaningless. The time, therefore, had come for such stimulus as England could impart; and, as we have seen, the most active and progressive minds of Germany were

nearly all looking to England for help. In turning in this direction, Lessing was only associating himself with the central current of the epoch. His appreciation of Shakespeare contrasts strongly with the strange talk of Voltaire about the "drunken savage;" and it is commonly supposed in Germany that Shakespeare's importance had never before been suspected. Englishmen had certainly not realised that in him they possessed the grandest literary force the world has ever seen; but before the fairest flowers of the national life faded under the breath of Puritanism, he was generally recognised as the first among his contemporaries; and when Puritanism became a less potent influence, the vast proportions of his work began to be dimly perceived. Outrageous liberties were taken with his text; but it was Shakespeare, not the bold men who ventured to "improve" his conceptions, that enthralled the enthusiastic audiences of Garrick. Instead of first suggesting to Englishmen the true value of their national poet, Lessing learned his importance from English writers, and no one would have been more surprised than he had the fact been questioned. In Germany, however, his statements were a genuine revelation, for although Shakespeare was not wholly unknown, his commanding position was only here and there dimly suspected. From this time forward he was studied by a continually enlarging circle of readers, and Wieland's translation soon brought him within general reach. By-and-by his name became the symbol of the stormy party which sought to transform the entire realm of thought; and until this day Shakespeare is the writer who, of all foreign influences, most profoundly touches the intellect of Germany. Although we cannot concede that Germans taught us to know him, we need not hesitate to allow that their admiration of his achievements has increased our pride in his greatness, and that their criticism has in many respects deepened and enlarged our comprehension both of his aims and his methods of attaining them.

The only other serious reference to the drama is con-

tained in an article on a tragedy by Weisse, and on some introductory remarks by that writer, expressing regret at the lack of important tragedies in German literature. Weisse had talked of authors letting "the years of genius fly past" until they became too much involved in the business of the world to devote themselves to poetry. Lessing makes short work of this sentimental and popular way of dealing with a complicated problem. In the first place, he is unable to conceive who the wonderful youths can be of whom Weisse speaks; but even if they exist, he insists that the wisest thing they can do is to postpone the exercise of their talents on tragedy. "The years of youth are not the years from which we can expect tragic masterpieces. The best mind can in this department, under his thirtieth year, bring forth only essays. The more a man tries the more he often injures himself. Let not any one begin to work until he is for the most part sure of his subject! And when can a writer be so? When he has sufficiently studied nature and the ancients. But the years of apprenticeship will be so long! Enough that the years of mastership will last the longer! Sophokles wrote tragedies past his eightieth year. And how good is it for a tragic poet to lose the wild fire, the youthful facility, which is so often called, and so seldom is, genius." [1]

Only those who fail to realise that the task of tragedy is to reflect the greatest and most awful aspects of human existence will be inclined to differ from this view. At first sight it seems a testimony to the impartiality of Lessing that he should have set forth a doctrine implying the extreme imperfection of "Miss Sara Sampson," the most ambitious of the works he had yet produced. At thirty, however, a man begins to understand that his opportunities of high effort are limited; and he was probably very willing to let "Miss Sara Sampson" go, on condition that he might hope to achieve results still more worthy of his powers and fame.

[1] S. S. vi. p. 203.

The two writers most commonly associated with Lessing are Wieland and Klopstock; and rightly so, for each in his own way took an important part in arousing the nation from its intellectual slumber. Both are subjected to a good deal of criticism in the "Literary Letters." Wieland, who was then about twenty-six, although a lively writer, was of an essentially shallow nature, and sprang lightly from one phase of thought to another. For some years he had been living in Zürich in constant association with Bodmer, and playing the *rôle* of a highly moral and religious philosopher. A critic having made some observations which were displeasing to him, he responded by attacking with savage fury the private character of his assailant. Lessing calls him severely to account for thus overstepping the limits which mark off the author from the man; but he himself is to some extent guilty of the same error, for he hints a doubt whether the fervour of Wieland is quite sincere. He refers to "what people who knew Wieland personally in K(loster) B(ergen) have told him," and declares that if the change from his earlier to his more recent style was due to external circumstances, "he pities him from the bottom of his soul." Lessing had at this time an instinctive dislike to Wieland: the dislike of a man of serious aims to one who seemed wholly without seriousness. It is, therefore, strange that he was not on his guard against attributing motives of which, as a writer, it was his duty to be altogether ignorant.

In a collection of prose writings, Wieland had included some passages which he called "Experiences of the Christian." Lessing, to whose straightforward nature any attempt to pass off as religion what had nothing to do with it was deeply repugnant, points out with some sharpness that the so-called "experiences"—which, since they were those of the Christian, ought to have been those of all Christians—were mere exercises of an individual fancy that left the heart "empty, cold." In another part of the same collection, Wieland had sketched a "plan of an Academy for the culture of the intellect of young people."

To the ordinary mind there are few subjects so dull as education, yet there is scarce any other of practical interest which has occupied the thoughts of so many men of genius. Almost all highly philosophical intellects find something extremely fascinating in the problem how the powers of the growing mind shall be best unfolded; and the inquiry inevitably leads to the deepest grounds of psychology and ethics. From his criticism of Wieland's ideal Academy, it is easy to see that the subject had often awakened Lessing's curiosity: his conceptions are far in advance of those of the vast majority of his contemporaries. Wieland recommended teachers to adopt the Sokratic method of instruction as the most pleasant. Lessing agrees that the Sokratic method is best; but he treats with contempt the notion that its pleasantness is what recommends it. "What sort of an idea must Herr Wieland have of the Sokratic mode of teaching? What did Sokrates do but seek to bring out by questions and answers all the essential elements that belong to a definition, and finally to draw conclusions from the definition in the same way? His definitions are thoroughly right; and if his proofs do not always stand the most severe test, it is evident that his age is to blame, not carelessness or an undervaluing of dry investigation on the part of the philosopher. In our times the Sokratic mode of teaching might be united with the strictness of the present method in so clear a way that one might bring out the deepest truths while appearing to seek only for right definitions."[1]

The facts of natural history are those with which Lessing would begin education; and when the pupil rises to higher ground, he considers that the aim ought to be, not to give him the results of research, but to set him on the path by which he may reach them for himself. The function of the teacher, in a word, is to lighten, not to abolish difficulties; to aid the intellect to a consciousness of its strength by encouraging its free expansion.

[1] S. S. vi. p. 25.

Dealing with the place of religion in education, Wieland maintained that it should be taught, but without reference to dogma, in the very words of Scripture. Apart from Scripture, his ideal of a serious instructor was Shaftesbury, whom he would have raised to the position of a classical author in his Academy. Lessing says nothing that indicates the exact nature of the religious teaching he himself would approve; but he shows how illogical, from the standpoint of those who accept Christianity as a supernatural faith, is Wieland's position, seeing that the words of Scripture may be twisted in support of all kinds of heresies. As for Shaftesbury, he is "the most dangerous enemy of religion, because he is the most refined. And however much good he may have in other respects—Jupiter declined the rose in the mouth of the serpent."[1]

The letters which contain these criticisms are among the earliest in the series. At a later period, dealing with Wieland's tragedy "Lady Jane Grey," Lessing exclaims:[2] "Rejoice with me! Herr Wieland has left the ethereal spheres, and again roams among the children of men!" The best parts of the work are taken from Rowe's play on the same subject, and Lessing good-humouredly exposes the plagiarism by accusing the Englishman of stealing the fine thoughts of a German author.

Klopstock is alluded to in a very different spirit. Lessing, as we have seen, recognised in him true genius, and he still treats him with unfailing respect. By no other critic, however, were his defects so firmly and clearly defined. Klopstock became more and more pious after the orthodox fashion, and, in new editions of his chief work, introduced changes in keeping with his stricter feelings. In one of the letters Lessing complains that, in passages in which the piety was improved, poetry had wholly vanished, and especially calls attention to the pettiness of substituting Christian for pagan conceptions—providence, for instance, for destiny; the singer of Zion for the Muse. Of Klopstock's

[1] S. S. vi. p. 26. [2] S. S. vi. p. 158.

lyrics he says, "they are so full of feeling that they often excite none in the reader."[1] This paradox he afterwards explains by suggesting that the poet omitted, in giving utterance to his emotions, to express the ideas and images by which they were aroused. The reader, not being allowed to share the causes of feeling, could not be expected to share the feeling itself. The doctrine which underlies this criticism is essentially that of Wordsworth, that poetry is "the utterance of emotion remembered in tranquillity." The poet cannot have too intense an experience; but it must be peacefully recalled, with a full comprehension of the conditions under which it arose.

The periodical moral essay was still a flourishing institution in Germany; and one of unusual pretensions had recently been started at Copenhagen by Cramer, a German theologian who was also something of a poet and critic. His associate in the work was Klopstock, at that time settled in Copenhagen, the King of Denmark having given him, in consideration of his literary merits, what was then deemed a liberal pension. The title of the new periodical was the "Northern Guardian;" and it was so frankly an imitation of the English "Guardian," that its fictitious conductor was a son of the Nestor Ironside, through whom Steele had so long addressed his public. Here, as in every other department of literature, Germany suffered from the lack of a great tradition and of a cultivated society which would not be put off with work that fell far below the traditional standard. Anything was thought good enough for the German public, and the poor German public meekly accepted what its instructors were kind enough to offer it.

Lessing devotes some letters to the "Northern Guardian;" and in the whole series there are none which exhibit more clearly his contempt for weak and slovenly thinking, his abhorrence of commonplace. In what he had intended to be a liberal tone Cramer had dwelt on the proper method of religious training. This was summed up in the doctrine:

[1] S. S. vi. p. 249.

proceed from simple to complex truth. And the practical application was that a child ought to be taught, not that Christ is the second Person of the Trinity, but that He is an example of virtue and a high moral teacher. The way would thus be prepared for the reception of dogma. Lessing offers no opinion as to the propriety of giving any sort of instruction in religion, but he very decidedly states his conviction that Cramer's idea is based on a wholly mistaken theory of human nature. Childhood, he points out—not without a slight touch of sarcasm—is the age at which the mind most readily accepts mystery; and if plain truths alone are then taught, the difficulty of accepting mystery afterwards is greatly increased, since the Socinian and the orthodox conceptions of Christianity are not related to each other as simple and complex, the former conducting to the latter, but are two opposed systems of belief.

This leads Lessing to comment on a still more confused notion of the "Northern Guardian:" one, moreover, opposed to every principle of his free and generous nature. It was that without religion—meaning the Christian religion—no one can be an honest man. Cramer had evidently imagined that he was here dealing with a principle to which no reasonable person could object, and decked it in that luxuriance of phrase by which preachers so often hide from themselves the real force of their ideas. Step by step Lessing follows his reasoning and lays bare his fallacies. No man without religion can be honest, said Cramer, for he is dishonest in the highest of all relations, his relations to God. But, answers Lessing, this is true only if the relations to God are admitted to exist; if a man is not convinced that they exist, there can be no dishonesty in not acting as if they did. Human passions are very powerful, urged Cramer, and what assurance can we have that if a man does not believe in future rewards and punishments he will be able to combat them? Suggesting in passing that Christianity includes much more than a belief in rewards and punishments, and that a man cannot claim to be

religious in the Christian sense whose convictions do not extend far beyond these limits, Lessing retorts that, according to this argument, religion only adds to the motives for noble conduct. That it does so he admits; but he insists that the motives which it strengthens may be intense enough to lead to goodness without it. And, after all, he continues, revealed religion assumes that its votaries are already honest men. It is characteristic of Lessing that he will not allow that it is Cramer who in this dispute represents the orthodox creed. He argues that the latter does not deny that men beyond the pale of Christianity may be virtuous; it only asserts that their virtues lack certain spiritual qualities conferred by the true faith.

The doctrine of Cramer is not only opposed to the plain facts of life, but strikes at the root of charity; and that is why Lessing, in whose eyes charity was the supreme virtue, turned against it his keen and polished lance. That he did so is an important indication of the position he had attained in regard to definite creeds: a position we shall have to investigate more fully hereafter.

Another article examined with some care was on the different ways of thinking of God, an article, as was afterwards known, written by Klopstock. He jeered at those who treat God as if He were "an object of science, and philosophise about Him with as little feeling as if they were developing the ideas of space and time." Then only are men thinking of Him truly when the soul is filled with delight and with thoughts which words are powerless to express. Lessing, on the contrary, maintains that it is not in the act of thinking about God, in the strict sense of the word thinking, that we experience pleasure. If we are really thinking of a subject, our sole pleasure at the moment is in the exercise of our faculties of thought; the object itself can give us pleasure only when the results of speculation are removed to some distance from the mind, and we contemplate them in their relations to the whole.

Then the greater the variety of parts, and the more completely they harmonise, the more perfect is the subject; and the deeper is the satisfaction it communicates to those who reflect upon it. As to thoughts which words are powerless to express, there are, says Lessing, no such thoughts; if they cannot be expressed, that means that they are not clearly conceived. What is beyond reach of expression is not thought, but feeling. The *nuances* of feeling are indeed too fine for utterance; and their utterance is not only impossible but unnecessary.

In one of his essays, Cramer solemnly warned writers on moral subjects against the danger of striving after originality. They ought not, he told them, to pass by important truths simply because they are well known. "I hope," he added, "that I shall be on my guard against this common error of moral writers." "Yes," says Lessing,[1] "the praise must be allowed him. Against this error he has been very much on his guard. He is, however, wrong in calling this a common error of moral writers; the reverse is, at least, quite as common." Of course, if a writer is developing a system of morals, he is compelled to include much that is well known; but Lessing will not allow that, if he is expounding particular truths, he has a right to trouble the public with any except those which are quite new, or on which he is able to cast new light.

The style of the "Northern Guardian" is condemned as severely as the commonplace character of its ideas and its confused thinking. "To use many words; to weave labyrinthine periods, in reading which one must breathe thrice before making out a complete meaning: that is the chief distinction of the contributor who seems to have written most of the articles in this periodical. His style is the bad pulpit style of a shallow preacher, who declaims such sentences only that his audience, before coming to the end of them, may have forgotten the beginning, and may hear him distinctly without in the least understanding him."[2]

[1] S. S. vi. p. 128. [2] S. S. vi. p. 132.

Criticism of this kind was so unusual that it created a flutter of excitement among the admirers of the virtuous journal against which it was directed; and one of the contributors, Herr Basedow, thought himself called upon to write an elaborate reply. He not only defended the "Northern Guardian," but overwhelmed the unknown assailant with wild abuse, and grossly misrepresented his motives. No opponents of Lessing ever had reason to complain of his unwillingness to meet them; he always stood prepared for battle, and entered upon it with unmistakable zest. He devoted to Herr Basedow no fewer than twelve letters; and the controversy is conducted with so much humour, and displays a mind so keen and vigorous, that they may still be read with interest. As Lessing was especially anxious to establish the principle that morality does not depend upon belief in dogma, it was this element of the dispute to which he devoted most attention; and he leaves not a single argument of Herr Basedow unanswered. First of all, he strips Basedow's ideas of the mass of verbiage which obscures them, and gives them their precise logical value. "What a small, insignificant, feeble beauty," he exclaims,[1] "is the 'Northern Guardian,' when one removes her fluttering dress, her rhetorical finery, her buskins! Such a Venus cannot say, I am more powerful naked than clad. Minerva would do no more than send her owl into the field against her. But stop: there must be no wit; Herr Basedow is a deadly enemy of wit. He looks for arguments, and how can wit provide arguments?" Lessing accordingly proceeds to give him arguments, and with so much force that he must have felt some doubt whether he had acted quite wisely in challenging so formidable an opponent.

The "Northern Guardian" was the last periodical of its class in Germany, and Lessing's admirers like to believe that it was he who gave the moral essay its death-blow. The truth is, however, that the spirit of the age was

[1] S. S. vi. p. 228.

becoming more and more opposed to writing of this kind. With such a drama as that of the Seven Years' War unfolding itself before them, thoughtful men were in no mood for respectable but dull moralising. For them the old platitudes had lost their vitality. Assume them, was their feeling, and what then? What of the problems which actually confront us: the perplexing facts of life here and now? No man of his time had so fine a sense as Lessing for the demands of his era; he heard them afar off, and responded to them before they had been articulately uttered. He had thus, in attacking the "Northern Guardian," a mighty unseen power behind him; and it was because he had this in far more important achievements that he became so great an influence in the development of his nation.

IV.

The fable has been allowed by general consent to die a natural death in modern literature, for it no longer corresponds to any want in the cultivated mind. Last century, however, it still played a considerable *rôle* in all the leading countries of Europe; and in Germany hardly any one ventured to claim the honours of a literary man who had not distinguished himself as a fabulist. The theory of the fable was also a favourite subject of speculation; and the Swiss writers considered it, as we have seen, the department in which poetry achieves its highest triumphs.

Lessing held aloof from no kind of activity which deeply interested his contemporaries; and fables are to be found among the earliest of his writings. At Leipzig the subject evidently occupied him a good deal, for there are many references to it in his letters, especially his letters to Mendelssohn. On going back to Berlin, he turned to it so seriously that in 1759 he published a volume of fables, accompanied by an admirable critical essay: "Discussions" ("Abhandlungen").

Hitherto we have seen Lessing as a critic treating merely of particular books or particular opinions. Here he deals with a whole department of literary activity. As we shall repeatedly find him doing this hereafter, it may be well to point out at once the method he invariably follows. He never starts in an abstract manner, as if he were the first to investigate his subject, deducing his conclusions from certain principles and in accordance with certain definitions. He takes the opinions of his predecessors, and by a complete examination of their reasonings slowly attains to his own results. His method, in short, is that of a thorough dialectic. It is an advance through the negative to the positive: a battle with error for truth. How deliberately he adopted the method will be seen from a passage in the "Dramaturgie," which may be here quoted:[1] "From the smallest observations of M. de Voltaire there is something to be learned, if not always that which he says, at least that which he ought to have said. *Primus sapientiæ gradus est, falsa intelligere;* and I know no author in the world by whose means a man can so well try to find out whether he stands at this first stage of wisdom as M. de Voltaire. At the same time, there is no one who can aid us less to mount to the second stage—*secundus, vera cognoscere.* A critical writer, it seems to me, finds in this little saying his best method. Let him first seek for some one with whom he can dispute; thus he will come gradually into his subject, and the rest will follow of itself. For this purpose, I frankly confess, I have chosen by preference French writers, and among these especially M. de Voltaire. If this method seems to any one more petulant than thorough, he must know that the thorough Aristotle himself has almost always adopted it."

His constant dialectic gives to all Lessing's prose writings a certain dramatic interest. We are always in the presence of two contending thinkers. Each has a fair field and strong arm; and the combatant who triumphs carries

[1] S. S. vii. p. 297.

off truth as a hard-won conquest. In most of the writings we have already passed in review we have found this characteristic; it is still more marked in those we have yet to examine.

The chief writers whose opinions he discusses in the Essay on the Fable are De la Motte, Richer, Breitinger, and Batteux; and the object he keeps in view is the attainment of a thoroughly satisfactory definition. It is as if he wished to prove that he had not spoken at random in the "Literary Letters," when he said that the Sokratic mode of teaching might be as applicable to the necessities of modern as to those of ancient thought.

One of the most essential principles of the treatise is that the fable must set forth an action. That is, it must consist of a series of changes. "A change, or even several changes which co-exist but do not follow one another, will not suffice to make a fable. And I regard it as an infallible proof that a fable is bad, that it does not deserve the name of a fable, if the supposed action may be painted as a whole. In that case it contains merely a picture, and the painter has not painted a fable but an emblem. 'A fisherman, having drawn his net from the sea, obtained possession of the larger fish which were caught in it; but the smaller ones slipped through the net and got happily into the water.' This is included among the fables of Æsop, but it is not a fable; at least it is a very mediocre one. It has no action, it contains merely a single fact which may be painted; and if I extended this single fact, this detention of the larger fish and slipping through of the smaller ones, by ever so many other circumstances, the moral principle would lie in it alone, not in the other circumstances also." [1]

But an action is not merely a series of changes. It is "a series of changes which together make a whole;" and "the unity of the whole depends upon the harmony of all the parts with an aim." [2] In this sense a drama contains an

[1] S. S. v. p. 414.

[2] S. S. v. p. 413.

action; and so does an epic. Wherein, then, does the action of the fable differ from that of the epic and the drama? The aim of the dramatic and epic poet is to excite passions. But he can excite passions only by imitating them; and he can imitate them only by setting up goals which they approach and from which they recede. Hence he must place within the action certain aims, and subordinate these to a chief aim, so that various passions may be able to co-exist. The fabulist, on the other hand, has nothing to do with passions; his object is simply to instruct, to give us a vivid apprehension of a particular moral truth. It is not, therefore, necessary for him to place within the action certain aims and to subordinate them to a chief aim: his object is gained at the point at which the moral principle is made sufficiently clear. "He often leaves his character alone in the midst of the way, and is indifferent about satisfying our curiosity. 'The wolf accuses the fox of a theft. The fox denies the deed. The ape is made judge. The accuser and accused bring their arguments and counter-arguments. At last the ape passes sentence:[1]

> Tu non videris perdidisse, quod petis;
> Te credo surripuisse, quod pulchre negas.'

The fable is complete; for in the sentence of the ape lies the moral which the fabulist intended to bring out. But is the incident complete? Conceive this story on the comic stage, and one will immediately see that it is cut short by a clever fancy, but not ended. The spectator is not contented when he sees that the dispute must go on behind the scenes. 'A poor harassed old man became indignant, threw his burden from his back, and called for Death. Death appears. The old man is terrified, and feels strongly that even to live miserably is better than not to live at all. Well, what am I to do? asks Death. Ah, dear Death, help me up with my burden again!'

[1] Phædrus, lib. i. fab. 10.

The fabulist is happily, and to our satisfaction, at his goal. But the story? What happened to the old man? Did Death let him live or take him away? About such questions the fabulist does not trouble himself; the dramatic poet, however, is bound to answer them." [1]

In a word, the action of the epic and the drama must be complete in itself; the action of the fable is made complete by reference to something outside itself, a moral principle. For this reason Lessing puts Æsop and Phædrus far above La Fontaine and his innumerable imitators. The latter do not make it their object simply to set forth a moral principle: hence they invade provinces of art with which, as fabulists, they have nothing to do. Æsop and Phædrus, having attained their proper aim, stop short, careless as to literary beauties that do not belong to them.

The frequent use of animals in fables was explained by Breitinger, the great critic of the Swiss School, by supposing that in literature we demand above all things the marvellous, and that the talking and arguing of animals are always a fresh surprise. Lessing disposes of this curious view by pointing out that the fabulist starts by assuming a world in which the fox and the wolf are capable of rational conversation, and that, therefore, there is no sense of strangeness in their discussions. The real reason why animals are so often introduced is, that their characters are permanent and universally known. Through them, therefore, a moral principle may be vividly set forth without explanation. To this Lessing adds the suggestion that animals are often preferable to men for the purposes of the fable, because human ills excite our feelings more keenly than those of the lower creation, and strong feeling obscures our perception of ethical truth.

Lessing's fables are in strict accordance with his principles. He rarely introduces ornaments of style; the moral idea to be impressed on the mind of his readers is kept strictly in view, and nothing that could diminish its

[1] S. S. v. p. 422.

effect is admitted into his scheme. The result is slightly depressing. Mental food must have some degree of freshness to exhilarate the intellectual energies; and freshness is precisely the quality which must necessarily, as a rule, be wanting in moral instruction. When, therefore, the fable is deprived of such charms as those with which La Fontaine strove to invest it, it is apt to become somewhat dull. To say that we violate the fundamental conception of its nature by making it interesting, may be quite true; but that is really to say that it ought not, strictly speaking, to be regarded as a department of literature. The utmost that can be urged on behalf of Lessing's fables is, that they display a considerable power of ingenious invention; that the maxims they enforce are those of a manly and straightforward nature, and that they are models of terse and clear statement.

One of the best of the collection is entitled "Zeus and the Horse":—

"'Father of beasts and men,' said the horse, approaching the throne of Zeus, 'they say that I am one of the most beautiful creatures with which thou hast adorned the world, and my self-love makes me believe it. But is there nothing in me that might be improved?' 'And what dost thou think might be improved in thee? Speak; I accept instruction,' said the kind god, smiling. 'Perhaps,' said the horse, 'I might be more swift if my legs were higher and more slender; a long swan's neck would not deform me; a broader chest would increase my strength; and as thou hast destined me to carry thy favourite, man, I might possess ready-made the saddle which the benevolent rider places upon me.' 'Good,' replied Zeus; 'have patience for a moment.' With serious face Zeus uttered the word of creation. Then life sprang up in the dust; organised matter shaped itself; and suddenly there stood before the throne—the ugly camel. The horse looked, shuddered, and trembled with amazed horror. 'Here,' said Zeus, 'are higher and more slender legs; here is a long

swan's neck; here is a broader chest; here is the saddle ready-made. Dost thou wish, horse, that I should thus reshape thee?' The horse still trembled. 'Go,' continued Zeus. 'For this time be taught without being punished. But that thou mayest be sometimes reminded of thy presumption, continue to exist, thou new creature'—and Zeus cast a preserving glance at the camel—'and may the horse never look at thee without shuddering.'"[1]

"The owner of the bow" may be taken as an illustration of Lessing's favourite principle, that each art attains its end only by being confined within its proper limits:—"A man had an excellent ebony bow, with which he shot far and sure, and which he highly valued. Once, however, as he carefully looked at it, he said: 'After all, thou art a little common! Smoothness is thy sole beauty. What a pity!' But the thought occurred to him, 'It may be put right! I will go to the best artist and get him to carve the bow.' He went, and the artist carved a whole hunt upon the bow; and what could have been more suitable for a bow than a hunt? The man was delighted. 'Dear bow, thou deservest these decorations!' Forthwith, wishing to try the bow, he bends it, and—it breaks."[2]

V.

At the conclusion of the seventeenth "Literary Letter," in proof of the fact that in the old German dramatic pieces there was a strong English element, Lessing refers to "the best-known of them, Dr. Faust." In this he finds "a number of scenes which only a Shakespearian genius could have conceived." "One of my friends," he continues, "has an old scheme of this tragedy, and he has given me a scene of it in which there is certainly much that is great. Are you anxious to read it? Here it is!"[3] Then follows a scene in which Faust, surrounded by seven spirits, demands which of the seven is swiftest? No one who has made himself familiar with Lessing's style could for a moment

[1] S. S. i. p. 165. [2] S. S. i. p. 186. [3] S. S. vi. p. 42.

doubt that the fragment is by him. The idea is old; but the strength, precision, and rapidity with which it is expressed, and the new and deeper significance attached to it, are altogether in Lessing's style. After questioning four spirits, he comes to the fifth.

"*Faust.*—And how swift art thou?

"*The Fifth Spirit.*—As swift as the thoughts of men.

"*Faust.*—That is something! But not always are men's thoughts swift. Not when truth and virtue demand them. How heavy are they then! Thou canst be swift if thou wilt; but who can assure me that thou always wilt be so? No, I should trust thee as little as I should be able to trust myself. Ah! (*To the Sixth Spirit*)—Tell me, how swift art thou?

"*The Sixth Spirit.*—As swift as the vengeance of the avenger.

"*Faust.*—The avenger! What avenger?

"*The Sixth Spirit.*—The Mighty, the Terrible, who reserved vengeance for himself, because vengeance pleased him.

"*Faust.*—Devil! thou blasphemest, for I see thou tremblest. Swift, thou sayest, as the vengeance of the—I had almost named him! No, he shall not be named among us!—Swift as vengeance? Swift? And I still live? And I still sin?

"*The Sixth Spirit.*—That he still lets you sin is vengeance!

"*Faust.*—And that a devil must teach me this!—But to-day, for the first time! No, his vengeance is not swift, and if thou art not more swift than his vengeance, go! (*To the Seventh Spirit*)—How swift art thou?

"*The Seventh Spirit.*—Insatiable mortal, if even I am not swift enough for thee——

"*Faust.*—Then say, how swift?

"*The Seventh Spirit.*—Not more and not less than the transition from good to evil.

"*Faust.*—Ha! thou art my devil! As swift as the pas-

sage from good to evil! Yes, that is swift; swifter than that there is nothing!—Away from here, ye snails of Orcus! Away!—As the transition from good to evil! I have experienced how swift it is! I have experienced it!"

The Faust legend had long before awakened his curiosity, and in 1755 he had certainly begun to work at it, for in that year we find Mendelssohn writing to him: "Where are you, dearest Lessing, with your tragedy of middle-class life? I should rather not mention it by name, for I doubt whether you will continue to call it 'Faust.' A single exclamation, 'O Faustus! Faustus!' might make the whole pit laugh."[1] During his present residence at Berlin he occupied himself so much with the subject that in the summer of 1758, according to a letter to Gleim, he hoped soon to have a play ready for representation. At two later periods, in Breslau and in Hamburg, he was again at work upon it; and there can be no doubt that he had two schemes, one in accordance with the old legend, another in which Faust was led astray by a human tempter.[2] It was long believed that he had finished both, and that they disappeared with other valuable papers in a box which was lost on the way between Leipzig and Wolfenbüttel. We do not, however, possess the evidence of a single person who ever saw the plays; and in a letter to his brother Karl, in which he gives a list of the contents of the box, he makes no allusion to Faust MSS. The more probable theory is that, finding there were insuperable difficulties in the way of a satisfactory solution of the tragic problem, he himself destroyed the parts he had finished.[3]

[1] Danzel, p. 451.

[2] The second scheme Lessing himself mentions, in a note in his "Collectanea," entitled "Dr. Faustus."

[3] See a masterly article, "Ein literarischer Findling als Lessings Faust," in "Nord und Süd," Band i. Heft 2, by Kuno Fischer. The "Findling" is a play published in 1876; issued by the editor, Karl Engel, as probably the second of Lessing's dramas. Kuno Fischer must be considered to have once for all disposed of its claims. There is no ground whatever for ascribing the work to Lessing; and it has nothing in common with his style or mode of thought. It is so far beneath his mark that it is surprising any one should have supposed it his.

If he did this, however, one brief paper escaped his notice: a paper containing a rough sketch of the preamble and the first four scenes of the earlier of the two dramas.[1] We are introduced to an old cathedral, where Beelzebub is receiving from a number of devils reports of their proceedings. Allusion is made to the high virtue of Faust; and one of the devils undertakes to bring about his fall. "Now," says a devil, "he sits by his nightly lamp and searches after the depths of truth. Too much curiosity is a fault; and out of one fault may all crimes spring, if one gives way to it too much." In the first scene Faust is discovered among his books by lamplight. He is perplexed by difficulties in the scholastic philosophy, and remembers that a scholar is said to have made the devil appear in order to solve certain doubts respecting Aristotle's Entelechy. He himself has often tried to do the like, but in vain. As the present is the right hour, he will try again; and no sooner does he pronounce the mystic words than a spirit springs from the ground "with a long beard, wrapped in a mantle." There is then, in the second scene, a dialogue, in which the spirit declares himself to be Aristotle; in reality it is the devil who has undertaken to destroy him. It was intended that, in the third scene, Faust, overjoyed at the power of his charm, should summon another spirit, and that in the fourth a devil should respond to his call, and enter upon a fresh dialogue.

At this point the fragment breaks off. Two of Lessing's friends, Herr von Blankenberg and Herr Engel, in brief papers recalling what he had told them of the play,[2] assert that when at the close the diabolical counsels seem to have triumphed, an angel proclaims that the devil has been dealing only with a phantom, and that the real Faust is uninjured. According to Engel, all that passes appears to Faust as a dream; and on awaking he "thanks Providence for the warning which it has designed to give him through so instructive a dream." Von Blankenberg merely says that as the devils are singing songs of victory an angel

[1] S. S. ii. p. 512. [2] S. S. ii. pp. 517-522.

exclaims from heaven: "Triumph not! you have not been victorious over humanity and science; the Deity has not given man the noblest of impulses in order to make him unhappy; what you saw and now believe yourselves to possess was nothing except a phantom."

If the evidence of these two friends is to be trusted, the real Faust would have had little or nothing to do; and it is difficult to see how Lessing could have expected to excite living interest in a phantom. It is, however, worth while to observe in how different a spirit from Marlowe and Goethe he approached the legend. The former finds his tragic motive in a love of power; the latter in a love of pleasure. With Lessing the tragic motive is drawn from a love of knowledge. The ultimate deliverance of Faust, however, must have tended to suggest a doubt whether the scientific impulse is capable of providing a real tragic motive.

Another play written at this time, published in 1759, was "Philotas," a prose tragedy in one act. It was probably never intended for representation; and we shall best understand it by regarding it as a protest against a prevailing mode of dramatic writing. In "Miss Sara Sampson" he himself had set the example of indulging freely in general moral reflection, and of stopping the action to develop to the utmost the possibilities of particular situations. Klopstock, in a recently published play, "The Death of Adam," had adopted a similar method, but presenting much vague sentiment without the true passion which underlies Lessing's work; and it seemed probable that this style would soon triumph over all others. Of late Lessing had been engaged in deep study of Greek tragedy, and as the English drama had suggested to him the supreme importance of strong impulse and free movement, that of Greece had convinced him that severe self-control is not less necessary. In "Philotas," therefore, he resolved that there should be no luxuriance of phrase, that the action should be simple and direct, advancing to its aim with swift steps and by the nearest path.

The hero, Philotas, is the son of a king at war with Aridæus, a neighbouring monarch. He is taken prisoner, and bitterly reproaches himself for the rashness which has brought upon him this hard fate. Afraid lest his father should be compelled to accept unfavourable terms of peace to procure his release, he determines to kill himself. He learns, however, that the son of Aridæus is, like himself, a prisoner, and that the kings are negotiating for an exchange. It instantly flashes upon him that if he were dead his father, through possession of the son of Aridæus, would be in a condition to exact any terms he chose. He is, therefore, strengthened in his original purpose, sends a message to his father, entreating him not to give up his prisoner immediately; and in the last scene, in the presence of Aridæus, he stabs himself.

In his immediate object Lessing fully succeeded, for the action is strictly compressed, and each link in the chain is made absolutely dependent upon all the rest. Yet Philotas himself does not excite our interest. Patriotism and filial loyalty are the only passions of which we find the smallest trace in his character; and they are so vehement, so theatrical, that it is impossible to sympathise with them. He leaves the impression rather of an excitable and wayward boy than of a deeply thinking man who knows the sacrifice he is about to make, yet who makes it deliberately from noble motives.

Lessing sent a copy of this play to Gleim, and, in order to obtain an impartial opinion, pretended that it was by a friend of his who desired to learn the judgment of "the old grenadier." Gleim, who did not suspect the authorship, was so pleased with it that he announced his intention of rendering it in verse, and forthwith let Lessing have some specimens of his workmanship. Lessing expressed himself much gratified. "I cannot describe to you," he wrote, (March, 1759[1]), "what pleasure you have given the author of 'Philotas' by the translation you have begun. He

[1] S. S. xii. p. 155.

concludes from this that he must to some extent have your applause. I add that your translation, if you continue as you have begun, will be excellent, and the best criticism for the author. Let him have the model which he still lacks: the model, I mean, of a noble tragical language, without bombast, without the ornamental little modes of speech which, in my opinion, are the sole merits of French tragic poetry. The idea of borrowing the name of the grenadier for it is excellent; I am only concerned that the public may ask in a somewhat displeased tone: 'But why does not the grenadier himself write a tragedy?' Patience, he will yet do so!"

Six weeks later he wrote: "Accept before all things my thanks for your 'Philotas.' You have made it your own; and the anonymous prose author can claim little or nothing of it. I knew beforehand that the grenadier could not merely translate. And it is well that he cannot. To some extent I also knew that he is far too much of a poet to let himself down altogether to tragic simplicity. His language is too full, his imagination too fiery, his expression often too bold and too new; at once passion bursts with him into full flame; in short, he has everything necessary to make him our Æschylus, and Æschylus will not do for our great tragic model. However, I shall get his 'Philotas' printed, because I am proud enough to believe that what has taught me so much may teach others not less: in respect, namely, to dignity of style, expression, rhythm, &c. If he will allow me, I shall explain myself more fully in an introduction about various points; and why should he not allow me, since I shall find nothing except beauties to set forth and criticise?"[1]

Lessing's German biographers have detected in these passages a great deal of fine *persiflage;* but to take his words in this way is to put upon them a somewhat forced construction. It is quite evident that he did not form a very high opinion of his friend's work, for the qualities he

[1] S. S. xii. p. 156.

describes as Æschylean conflicted with his central design; but Gleim then held a high position in literature, and Lessing had a genuine esteem for him. There is, therefore, no reason for ascribing to the letters any other meaning than that which they plainly bear. Gleim's verses were published; and, in the copy sent to him, Lessing is said to have puzzled his friend by changing "Philotas versified" to "Philotas verified." When Gleim discovered whose work he had undertaken to improve, he good-humouredly sent Lessing, as a peace-offering, an anker of excellent Rhine wine from the cathedral cellars at Halberstadt.

Of this "poetical present" Lessing writes (July, 1759):—"I do not know how I can better thank the grenadier than by drinking his health with every glass. With how much heart would I drink for him by myself! And how doubly good would the wine taste if you came to us and helped us to finish it! My summer room would certainly not displease you. Only for heaven's sake do not suppose that I work there. I am never lazier than when I am in this my hermitage. When I am in high spirits, I form projects—projects for tragedies and comedies; I then play them to myself in thought; laugh and cry in thought; and applaud myself in thought; or rather make those friends applaud in thought, of whose applause I am proudest."[1]

The next letter to Gleim, dated August 25, 1759, is full of anxiety. Kleist's friends in Berlin have heard that he is among the wounded in Frankfurt-on-the-Oder, and they are uncertain whether he is dangerously ill. Another letter, six days later, announces that a Major von Kleist has died at Frankfurt; but Lessing will not believe that it is *their* Kleist. "No! Our Kleist is not dead; it cannot be; he lives still. I will not vex myself before the time; and I will not vex you before the time. Let us hope the best. By the next Frankfurt post we shall learn all. If he still lives, I shall visit him. I shall no more see him? I shall in my life no more see him, speak with him, embrace him?—Farewell."

[1] S. S. xii. p. 159.

"Alas, dearest friend," writes Lessing, on September 6, "it is unhappily true. He is dead. We possessed him. He died in the house and in the arms of Professor Nicolai. In the greatest pain he was throughout tranquil and cheerful. He greatly desired to see his friends once more. Would that it had been possible! My sorrow is a very wild sorrow. I do not, indeed, wish that the balls should have taken another way because an honourable man stood there; but I do wish that the honourable man——. See, many a time my pain causes me to be angry at the man himself who has excited it. Already he had three, four wounds: why did he not go? For fewer and smaller wounds generals have retired without dishonour. He *wished* to die. Forgive me if I am too hard on him. For it may be that I am too hard on him. They say he would not have died of the last wound, but he was neglected. Neglected! I know not at whom I shall rage. The wretches who have neglected him——Ha! I must break off. The professor has doubtless written to you. He delivered a funeral oration over him. Another, I know not whom, has made a poem upon him. They cannot have lost much in Kleist who are now in the position to do this. The professor wishes to print his oration, and it is so pitiful! I know for certain that Kleist would rather have taken with him another wound to his grave than have such stuff talked about him. Has a professor a heart? He wants from Ramler and me verses to print along with his oration. If he has asked the same from you, and you gratify his wish —dearest Gleim, that you must not do. At present you feel too much to be able to say what you feel. And it is not all the same to you, as it is to a professor, what you say and how you say it." [1]

A nobler and more fragrant wreath has rarely been placed upon a poet's grave. Such a letter from such a man would alone suffice to give Kleist immortality; and for one brief moment it lays open depths in Lessing's own

[1] S. S. xii. p. 162.

nature which he seldom revealed even to the few whom he most dearly loved.

VI.

Lessing's classical studies at this time went over a wide range, but the authors he chiefly read were Homer and Sophokles. "Have I not seen in your library," he wrote to Gleim in February, 1760, "an Italian translation of Sophokles? Will you have the kindness to lend it me for a short time? And anything else you may possess that relates to this ancient tragic poet, who occupies me at present more than anything else?"[1] He began to write a Life of Sophokles, intending that it should accompany a translation of the poet's works. Unfortunately the undertaking was broken off before he had advanced very far, and he could never be persuaded afterwards to resume it. When his friends urged him to do so, he pleaded that he would have to learn Greek again, and fill his mind anew with subjects which had been displaced by others.

Another task in which he was engaged was the translation of Diderot's plays and remarks on the theory of the drama. The main object of Diderot's criticism was to turn the sympathy of the French people from their classical drama. Why, he asked, should the stage incessantly represent the crimes and the follies of men? In human life duty and virtue play a much more important part than either folly or crime; and it is the function of the stage to mirror the whole of life, and not this or that particular aspect of it. Hence he insisted that besides tragedy and comedy there should be a third class of dramatic works, "le genre sérieux," a species standing midway between the two extremes and having affinities with both. "Je le repète donc," he exclaimed, in his usual rapid and animated style: "L'honnête, l'honnête. Il nous touche d'une manière plus intime et plus douce que ce qui excite notre mépris et nos ris; poète, êtes-vous sensible et délicat?

[1] S. S. xii. p. 166.

pincez cette corde, et vous l'entendrez résonner ou frémir dans toutes les âmes." It was an essential part of the theory that the themes of this "genre sérieux" should be the fortunes not of kings and heroes, but of common men, and that the dramatist should trust for his effects to the simple and unadorned language of nature. In "Le Fils Naturel" and "Le Père de Famille" he gave practical illustrations of his critical doctrines.

Lessing formed a high opinion both of these works and of the theory they embodied. "Those competent to judge," he says in the preface to his translation, "will miss in the former neither genius nor taste; and in the latter will everywhere see traces of the thinker who extends the ancient ways, and cuts new paths through unknown regions. I might, indeed, say that since Aristotle no more philosophical mind than Diderot has treated of the theatre."[1] Twenty years later, when his career as a dramatist was over, Lessing, in republishing the translation, and publicly acknowledging it as his work, expressed his gratitude to "the man who had taken so great a share in forming his taste." "For," he continued, "be this what it may, I know that without Diderot's example and doctrines it would have taken a quite different direction. Perhaps a more individual direction, but hardly one with which in the end my understanding would have been more satisfied."[2]

This is a very remarkable confession, and one which, in view of Lessing's actual work, it is difficult to explain. For already, in "Miss Sara Sampson," he had proved that he had shaken himself free from the influence of the old French drama; and not one of his later dramatic writings can be classed in Diderot's "genre sérieux." What, then, was it that he owed to the French critic? The answer seems to be that Diderot first made him vividly realise the necessity of simple and natural action, such as instantly appeals to the feelings of the spectator. In his

[1] S. S. vi. p. 355.

[2] S. S. vi. p. 357.

earlier comedies we move in a world which does not profess to have a close connection with reality; and in "Miss Sara Sampson" the characters are sometimes impelled by unintelligible motives, while they often talk in stilted language. The feeling expressed in "Philotas" is also violent and exaggerated. The later and greater plays, as we shall see, are not open to these objections. The actions which they present bear the stamp of truth; and the dialogue is strictly appropriate to the nature of the persons by whom it is conducted. In this respect Lessing is far superior to Diderot himself. It was not strange that, in the reaction against Racine and Corneille, "Le fils naturel" and "Le père de famille" should be hailed as utterances of genuine feeling; but it is impossible for a later generation to share the admiration they excited. Not only are they defective in every important technical quality, but the "nature" on which the author prided himself now seems of a very theatrical description. The distinction between the two men as dramatists could not be better expressed than it was expressed by Madame de Staël: "Mais Diderot, dans ses pièces, mettait l'affectation du naturel à la place de l'affectation de convention, tandis que le talent de Lessing est vraiment simple et sincère."[1]

[1] The relations of Lessing to Diderot are discussed by Danzel, pp. 472–481; and by Guhrauer, (1) pp. 321–323. An interesting parallel of Lessing and Diderot, who had several striking points of resemblance, will be found in Hettner's Literaturgeschichte, ii. pp. 330–332.

CHAPTER IX.

BRESLAU.

TOWARDS the end of 1760 Lessing had been nearly three years in Berlin, and he began once more to long for change of scene. He had exhausted all the sources of mental stimulus which the town contained; he was no longer in such active sympathy with his friends in regard to the highest subjects of thought as he had been some years before; incessant labour had injured his health; and he desired some position in which, at least for a time, he should be able to procure an income without the necessity of straining to the utmost his intellectual energies. Things of the mind had for him so intense a fascination for their own sake, that he always felt it a kind of degradation to be compelled to win his daily bread by means of them. His desire for some change in his mode of existence seems to have become generally known, for we find Gleim making inquiries whether it was true that he had become quartermaster of a regiment, while in Leipzig it was stated that he had accepted a commission in a regiment of Free Lances.

Among the officers whom he had met at Kleist's in Leipzig was a Colonel von Tauentzien. The latter had now become a General, and had lately distinguished himself by his gallant defence of Breslau against the Austrians. In return for this service, Frederick had made him Governor of the town; and he became also director of the Mint. He was a vigorous, frank, loyal soldier, of whom Lessing afterwards said that if Frederick were so reduced that his

whole army could be collected under a tree, Tauentzien would undoubtedly be one of this remnant. Lessing seems to have made a profound impression upon him, for being on his elevation in want of a secretary, he forthwith offered him the post.[1] It was not precisely the sort of office for which Lessing's training had fitted him; but the very fact that it would take him away from the mere world of books and plunge him into the world of men added to its attractions. He accepted it, and in November 1760, as usual without saying farewell to his friends, started for Breslau. On the way he stopped at Frankfurt-on-the-Oder for the purpose of visiting Kleist's grave.

His motives for making so great a change may best be gathered from his own words, written at this period: "I will for some time spin around myself like an ugly caterpillar, that I may be able to come to light again as a brilliant butterfly."[2]

A week or two after his arrival in Breslau (December 6, 1760), he wrote to Ramler: "You will perhaps be surprised at my decision. To confess the truth, I am myself surprised at it, at least for quarter of an hour every day. But would you know, dearest friend, what I then say to myself? 'Fool,' I say, striking my forehead, 'when will you begin to be content with yourself? It is true that nothing in particular drove you from Berlin; that you will not find here the friends you have left there; that you will have little time for study. But was not everything done of your own free will? Were you not satiated with Berlin? Do you not believe that your friends must have been satiated with you? that it is time to live again more among men than among books? that after his thirtieth year a man ought to think of filling not only his head but his purse? Patience! The latter may be more rapidly

[1] Danzel first suggested that Lessing had made Tauentzien's acquaintance through Kleist. The matter has now been put beyond dispute by the publication of Gleim's correspondence with Kleist, in Pröhle's Lessing, Wieland, Heinse, &c.

[2] Sämmtliche Schriften, xi. (2), p. 406.

filled than the former. And then!—then you will be again in Berlin, again among your friends, and again study. Oh, if this then were to-morrow! And so, dearest friend, hope calms me again, and causes me to approve the step I have taken, and to flatter myself that my friends will also approve it. You know me, and if I am not to be praised, I am at least to be excused."[1]

Soon after he left Berlin he was made foreign member of the Academy of Sciences. This honour would not under any circumstances have greatly elated him; but as the announcement of it in the newspapers was accompanied by the absurd statement that he had been elected at his own request, he was irritated rather than pleased. Strangely enough, his friend Sulzer had objected to his election, on the pedantic ground that it was difficult to associate him with one special department. In a letter to Mendelssohn he declares himself "very indifferent" with respect both to the Academy and to Sulzer. "Whether he is false I know not; but I do know that he is often very illogical. Perhaps in this case also he was only the latter."

If he had chosen, Lessing might now have become a rich man, for the necessities of war compelled Frederick from time to time to undertake doubtful Mint operations, and of these the secretary of the director had necessarily the earliest information. Tauentzien himself amassed a fortune of from 120,000 to 130,000 thalers; but Lessing was a man of finer mould, and passed through this ordeal with honour unstained. When he finally left Breslau, after nearly five years' service, he was very little better off than when he entered it.

"Lessing," says Goethe, "who, unlike Klopstock and Gleim, readily flung away personal dignity, because he had confidence that he could at any moment resume it, took delight in frequenting taverns, and in the free life of the world, as he constantly needed something

[1] S. S. xii. p. 170.

to counterbalance his powerful inward activity."[1] Whatever we may think of Goethe's explanation of this tendency, it did undoubtedly mark him off from all the prominent literary men of his time, and at no period more than during his residence in Breslau.[2] He went a great deal into society, and the society he found most congenial was, as ever, that of officers and actors. Of the former class he necessarily met a great many, gradually, indeed, forming the acquaintance of nearly all the higher officers of the Prussian army. Almost every evening he visited the theatre. Here the favourite pieces were of a rather rough description, harlequin contributing largely to the entertainment; but Lessing used to say to one of the actors, who afterwards became a dramatic writer, and to whom he gave many useful hints, that he greatly preferred "a healthy, rapid farce to a tame or sickly comedy or tragedy." Rarely stopping to the end of the performance, he would go from the theatre to some tavern, whence he would return home when most respectable citizens had long been asleep. He lived for some time in the house of a confectioner; and this worthy person was so enraged by the late hours of his irregular lodger, that he made a particular kind of gingerbread cake in the form of a night watchman, to which he gave the name of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing! In the morning he did not rise till eight or nine. "I have even," says the friend of his to whom the world owes these details, "found him in bed at ten o'clock."

Among other tastes developed at this time was an extraordinary love of gaming, which never afterwards altogether deserted him. He played for such high stakes that even General Tauentzien on one occasion expostulated with him. His excitement in play was intense. "One of his friends," says Karl Lessing, "once saw drops of perspira-

[1] Wahrheit und Dichtung, part ii. book 7.

[2] For details respecting Lessing's life in Breslau we are chiefly indebted to some notes by Rector Klose, one of Lessing's friends, who supplied them for the biography by Karl Lessing.

tion running down his face; yet that evening he played very luckily. As they went home together, his friend urged that he would ruin not only his purse but, what was much more important, his health. 'Exactly the contrary,' answered Lessing. 'If I played coldly, I should not play at all; I have an object in playing with so much passion. The vehement movement puts my blood in circulation; it delivers me from a certain physical oppression from which I sometimes suffer.'"

His friends in Berlin, who heard exaggerated rumours of his way of living, shook their heads with much solemn gravity at what they considered his sad fall. Mendelssohn almost gave him up as lost, and wrote to him with particular fervour on the evils of gaming. Lessing himself had occasional fits of remorse for letting so many hours slip from his grasp without profit. "Most sorrowfully I confess," he wrote to Mendelssohn in March, 1761, "that hitherto I have been anything but happy. I must, however, confess this, because it is the sole reason why I have not written to you for so long a time. I have written to you from here only once, have I not? You may, therefore, boldly wager that I have only once rightly come to myself. No! I could not have foreseen that. But in this tone all fools complain. I should and might have foreseen that trifling occupations would tire one more than the most severe study; that in the circle within which I allowed myself to be enchanted, false pleasure and dissipations upon dissipations would unsettle the blunted mind; that—Ah, my best friend, your Lessing is lost! By-and-by you will no more know him; he himself no more. Oh, my time, my time, my all that I have—to sacrifice it in this way, I know not for what objects! A hundred times I have thought of forcibly tearing myself away from this connection. Yet is it possible to make good one inconsiderate act by another? Perhaps, however, this is only one of those dark days in which nothing reveals itself to me in its true light. To-morrow perhaps I shall

write to you more cheerfully. Oh, write to me often, but more than mere scoldings for my silence. Your letters are to me a true alms; and will you give alms only for recompense? Farewell, my dearest friend; the first good hour which my discontent leaves me shall certainly be yours. I look to you with all the restless longing with which an enthusiast awaits heavenly manifestations."[1]

Utterances of this kind ought not to have been taken very seriously, for it was Lessing's way, under the influence of a momentary impulse, to condemn himself with far too much harshness. He had not only lost none of his interest in literature, but was slowly preparing for his greatest undertakings. At the very time when he seemed to be sauntering idly through life he was engaged in profound study of Spinoza, and he read the Christian Fathers with an energy which enabled him many years afterwards to strike some very unexpected blows at theological intolerance. A considerable part of "Laokoon" was written in Breslau; and when he returned to Berlin, "Minna von Barnhelm" needed only a few finishing touches. In reality this was one of the busiest and most fruitful periods of his career; and his work was all the more splendid in its results because it was in no way forced, but was taken up or dropped according to the inclination of the moment.

His improved circumstances gave rise to very wild hopes in the large and somewhat distressed household at Kamenz. To the pastor and his family it appeared that an El Dorado had suddenly been opened for their benefit; and many and urgent were the applications for help to which Lessing had to respond. The tone of his letters to his father sometimes implies that the demands on his purse were greater than he could meet; but he never refused help he was able to give, and he gave it with a readiness which must have made it doubly valuable.

In his treatment of the poor at Breslau he by no means

[1] S. S. xii. p. 173.

anticipated the rigid doctrines of political economy. He used to carry gold and silver in the same pocket, and when a beggar appealed to him he would take out the first coin that came to his hand. Sometimes an honest man would bring back a gold piece, but Lessing would only praise his honesty, and point out to him that Providence had evidently intended this good luck for him. Somebody once expostulated with Lessing for helping a person who did not deserve to be aided. "If we only received what we deserved," he answered, "how much should any of us have?"

The only passion he fully gratified—except gaming—was his passion for books. He had always wished to have a library of his own; and now at last he was in a position to see the wish fulfilled. Every auction in Breslau at which books were for sale he diligently visited; and catalogues of future auctions were sent to him from Berlin, where his friends were often asked to make purchases for him. He once gave Nicolai directions to buy a particular book, no matter what it might cost; but unfortunately he forgot that he had sent precisely the same directions to another friend. The result was that at the sale the two men bid against each other until, to the astonishment of the bystanders, they rose to a sum enormously beyond the value of the book. At last each begged the other to explain, when of course the mystery was solved.

In 1762 Lessing accompanied his chief in a military expedition to Schweidnitz; and in the following year, when the Seven Years' War came to an end, it was his duty, as the Governor's secretary, publicly to proclaim in Breslau the conclusion of peace. Shortly afterwards he went with Tauentzien for a few weeks to Potsdam, whence he visited his friends in Berlin. Nicolai had been for some time married; and Lessing had now to make the acquaintance of his wife. He had once written to her a very lively and amusing letter, begging her to allow her husband to attend an auction for him: the auction, as it

happened, at which his forgetfulness led to the expensive little comedy above mentioned.

After the conclusion of peace, Tauentzien became Governor of Silesia, and although Lessing often thought of returning to his old life, he did not really do so till 1765. The pressure of business was much less severe than it had been during the war; and with increased leisure he continued with more persistent energy than before the various works he had begun. "Minna von Barnhelm" he was especially anxious to complete; and visitors long saw the garden—now built over—in which, in the fresh morning breeze, he used to write it before the routine work of the day began. Never had intellectual achievement been more easy or delightful to him; but in the midst of his activity, in the summer of 1764, he was struck down by fever. Poor Lessing! As if this were not enough, he had the misfortune to be attended by a doctor who thought that the best way of entertaining him was incessantly to sing the praises of Gottsched! A curious little anecdote is told of this illness. When it was at its worst, a friend came in and found the sufferer lying with extraordinary stillness. "What are you thinking of?" asked the visitor. "I am trying," answered Lessing, "to realise what passes in the soul at the moment of dying." The anxious friend hastened to make the profound remark that this was impossible. "You bother me," Lessing interrupted coldly.

Some such time of enforced repose was precisely what was needed by his restless and often troubled spirit. Many thoughts of his past and future swept through his mind, and it is not too much to say that this illness marked an era in his career; that he rose from it with more serious purpose and firmer will. "A thousand thanks," he wrote to Ramler as he was recovering, on August 5, 1764, "for your considerate friendship! Ill indeed I may still be; but I will not on that account die yet. I have so far recovered, except that I am still troubled by frequent dizzi-

ness. I hope this also will soon pass away, and then I shall be as if born again. All changes of our temperament are, I believe, connected with the action of our physical economy. The serious epoch of my life approaches; I begin to be a man, and flatter myself that in this burning fever I have destroyed the last remnant of my youthful follies. Happy illness! Your love wishes me healthy; but ought poets to desire for themselves the health of an athlete? Would not a certain measure of ill-health be more advantageous for fancy, for sentiment? The Horaces and Ramlers live in weak bodies; the healthy Theophili[1] and Lessings become gamesters and drunkards. Wish me, therefore, healthy, dearest friend; but with a little reminder, with a little thorn in the flesh, which will make the poet from time to time conscious of human frailty, and force upon him the fact that all writers of tragedy do not become with Sophokles ninety years of age, but that even if they did, Sophokles wrote about ninety tragedies, while I have as yet written only one! Ninety tragedies! At once dizziness comes upon me! Oh, let me break off, dearest friend!"[2]

A fortnight later he writes again to Ramler: "I am told that you are very well. Remain so, and do not become sickly! Sickly, I say; for I have for some time held sickliness to be worse than sickness. A wretched life when one is up and vegetates, and passes for healthy without being so! Before my illness I was in a mood for working such as I have seldom been in. I cannot yet get into it again, begin as I may. I burn with anxiety to put the last touches to my 'Minna von Barnhelm;' and yet I would not like to work at it with half my powers. I have not been able to say anything to you of this comedy, for it is really one of my latest projects. If it is not better than all my previous dramatic pieces, I am firmly resolved to have nothing more to do with the theatre."[3]

[1] The reference is to Theophilus Döbbelin, an actor of whom Lessing had a very low opinion. [2] S. S. xii. p. 196. [3] S. S. xii. p. 198.

Lessing's parents made up their minds that he would not again lift his anchor and set his sails to the breeze, particularly as it was highly desirable that he should continue to lighten their many burdens. Nothing, however, was further from his mind than the idea of remaining for ever in Breslau. With all his love for contact with actual life, his love of letters and of freedom was still more intense; and no one who really knew him could have doubted, especially after the conclusion of peace, when his duties became less exciting, that he would soon make himself once more his own master. In letter after letter he gave his family to understand that they must not count much longer upon his being able to aid them to the same extent as he had been doing.

On November 30, 1763, he wrote to his father: "I hope you do not trust to me as if I had hung my studies on the nail and would devote myself to pitiful occupations *de pane lucrando.* I have already lost more than three years with these trifles. It is time I had returned to my old track. Everything I hoped to attain by my present mode of life I have attained; I have tolerably re-established my health; I have rested, and with the little I could spare collected an excellent library, which I do not wish to have collected in vain. Whether I shall have some hundreds of thalers over, I myself do not know." [1]

About six months later, a little before his illness, he again gave his father this necessary warning: [2]—"The confusion of my affairs is made greater by the fact that General von Tauentzien lies dangerously ill. Whatever may be the result of this illness, the total change of my present situation remains quite certain. It will vex me if my dearest parents, misled by false intelligence, have formed a false conception of my circumstances hitherto. I have certainly given no occasion for misunderstanding, but have more than once mentioned that my present engagement can be of no duration, that I have not resigned

[1] S. S. xii. p. 189. [2] S. S. xii. p. 193.

my old plan of life, and that I am more than ever resolved to undertake no kind of employment that is not perfectly to my mind. Half of my life is past, and I know no reason why, during the short remainder of it, I should make a slave of myself. I write this to you, dearest father, and must write it to you, that it may not surprise you if in a short time you again see me far removed from all hopes of, and claims to, a fixed position, as the phrase is. I need only some time to deliver myself from all the perplexities in which I have become involved, and then I shall certainly leave Breslau. What will happen afterwards gives me no concern. Any one who is healthy and will work has nothing to fear in the world. To dread long illnesses and I know not what circumstances that may prevent one from working, shows poor trust in Providence. I have more faith, and have friends."

During his residence at Breslau Lessing was offered the post of Professor of Eloquence at the university of Königsberg. Had he accepted it, he and Kant would have been colleagues; but one of the duties of the office was to deliver an annual oration in honour of the reigning sovereign, and this alone sufficed to decide him against it.

There is probably no man of high culture who does not at some time of his life long to visit Italy and Greece, the lands with which the best impulses of the modern world are associated, and whose glorious epochs, although far off, are in reality nearer to us than the intermediate Middle Ages. To Lessing it was at this period one of his dreams of perfect happiness to spend some time in both countries in close study of the remnants of ancient art. A gleam of poetry was cast across common duties by the hope that this happiness might not be beyond his reach. His idea was to go to Vienna and make free use of the Imperial Library there; then, when he felt himself in a position thoroughly to profit by the experience, to make for Rome and Athens. But the hard facts were very different from his glowing anticipations. When at last, in the spring of

1765, the moment for final decision came, he found himself under the necessity of turning his steps once more towards the Prussian capital. He went by Leipzig, whence he paid a visit to his family at Kamenz. Nicolai happened to be at the Leipzig Fair; and the two friends travelled northwards together, arriving in Berlin in the latter half of May.

CHAPTER X.

FOURTH RESIDENCE IN BERLIN.

In going to Berlin this time, Lessing was not without hope that he would find an agreeable settlement. The keeper of the Royal Library, a very old man, had just died; and as Lessing's friends had long thought that this was precisely the proper post for him, they made every effort they could to secure his appointment. Colonel Guichard, known as Quintus Icilius, a great favourite at court, mentioned his name to the King; but the petty quarrel with Voltaire had made a disagreeable impression on Frederick's mind, and, strange to say, notwithstanding all that had passed in the interval, he had not forgotten it. He, therefore, refused to make Lessing his librarian. Winckelmann was then suggested, and to him, although a German, no objection could be offered. By one of those strokes of perverse humour, however, which constantly irritate even the greatest admirers of Frederick, the negotiations that were forthwith entered into came to nothing. In consideration of Winckelmann's high position as a scholar and critic, the salary of five hundred thalers received by the former librarian was raised to fifteen hundred; and he was made to understand that the amount might be raised to two thousand. He very naturally asked the latter sum. Thereupon Frederick announced that the income would be a thousand thalers. Winckelmann of course regarded this as an indignity, and refused to have anything more to say to the proposal. Writing to the friend who had communicated with him on the subject, he recalled the story of the singer of whom

Frederick had said that the pay he demanded was that of a general, and who had replied, "Ebben'! faccia cantare il suo generale!" This answer was adopted by Winckelmann as appropriate to his own case.[1]

Lessing's friends now thought there would be greater hope of success than before. The courtier who had formerly urged his claims ventured, therefore, once more to remind Frederick of him, insisting that he was one of the most learned men in Europe, and that they would in vain seek in other countries for so good a librarian. Frederick was annoyed by this persistence, denounced German scholars as pedants, praised the French as vastly their superiors, and announced his intention of finding in France the man he wanted. He had no reason to congratulate himself on the result of his obstinacy. Having read a learned work by Pernety, and being much pleased with it, he asked a high official of this name in his service whether the scholar was a relative of his. The answer was that they were brothers. Through the official, therefore, an offer of the librarianship was made to his brother, who lost no time in signifying his assent. Only after he was installed did the King discover that the real Pernety was not a brother but a cousin of the person he had consulted. The new librarian was a man of so weak a character that after sixteen years' service he fled in terror from Berlin, having been convinced by a fanatical preacher that the end of the world was at hand, and that the vials of Divine wrath would first be poured out on Brandenburg.[2]

On the pedestal of Rauch's great statue of Frederick, Lessing has a place among the King's illustrious contemporaries—beneath the horse's tail, it is true, but still he is there. And with a true instinct the German nation has fastened upon Lessing as the one contemporary of Frederick who stood on the same level with him, and wrought with equally splendid force in the great task of arousing Germany

[1] Stahr, i. p. 262. [2] Stahr, i. p. 264.

to new energy. Yet when an opportunity offered of serving the man whose name was to be so intimately associated with his own, Frederick coldly passed on, ignorant of the brilliant chance destiny had thrown in his way. He has been much blamed for this mistake, and generally for his complete indifference to the rising tide of intellectual life that surrounded him. It is, however, only fair to remember that in the days of Frederick's youth there was no real modern literature in Germany, and that he could hardly be expected, amid the pressure of later duties, to change his habits, and give minute attention to the literary progress of his countrymen. We may perhaps add that, although it would have been fortunate for Lessing had he obtained the settled position he wished, it was not, on the whole, unfortunate that Frederick neglected German literature. His influence could only have tended to keep it in strict subjection to France. Left to itself, it took a natural direction, and became a completely independent product.

What with additional aid given to his family, and the expenses attending his change of life, Lessing found himself under the necessity of once more writing for money. While in Breslau he had persuaded himself that he would have no great difficulty in resuming this kind of employment. In reality, however, it worried him more than ever to be compelled to work whether he felt inclined or not. His brother Karl, who entered at this time upon a literary career in Berlin, has drawn a vivid picture of the manner in which a day would pass, pointing out that while he had in Breslau many outward hindrances, he now found them in the nature of his occupations and in his own free disposition.

"When, in the best mood for work," he says, evidently thinking of the experiences of a particular day, but one typical of many others, "he walked up and down, the title of a book would attract his attention. He looks into it, finds a thought there which has no relation whatever to the subject of his meditation, but which is so splendid,

so excellent, that he must really make a note of it; and in doing so he cannot pass by his own thoughts in silence. These point to something else, which he will have immediately to investigate if he will not run the risk of losing it when he wants it. What a new discovery! What a beautiful explanation! Now the matter has a quite different aspect! The printer's boy, however, knocks and demands manuscript. Yes, that is ready; he has only once more to glance through it, and in order to do so he had set to work that day very early. But he had risen from his work, and his rising had given him material for a new book; the manuscript, the printing of which was going on, had, therefore, not been glanced through. The boy comes again, as directed; and driven by necessity, he has been able to collect his thoughts. He himself sees it will be out of his power, but he will not put his foot out of the room until the manuscript is ready! Good God! About evening the atmosphere of the room oppresses his whole soul; he must have some fresh air. He will go only for one hour to a friend! The friend talks to him of an interesting matter, and they get into conversation. He returns home in good time, but for that day his manuscript is forgotten. He sits up, however, till twelve o'clock. His friend's opinion has much that is attractive; it must, however, be corrected by a certain circumstance. If the latter is not beyond doubt, then the opinion is beautiful appearance without reality. He goes to bed, rises, is not cheerful, and would rather do anything than sit and read through his own work, which does not at all please him. 'Brother,' he at last says, 'authorship is the most abominable, the dullest employment. Take warning by me!' He is again on the right track, but for how long? He has only to look up, and his books play him a new trick. If only he had no books!"

He was distracted by forming all sorts of plans. "At one time he would go away from Berlin, for every place afforded that by which he thought of living; now he

would go to Dresden, again to the country in order to work for some years at comedies alone, afterwards getting them represented by a troupe of his own, with which he would go about from place to place. Then the looseness of this kind of life would occur to him."

The "Literary Letters" had gone on during his absence, although with greatly diminished power and splendour. A few weeks after his return Lessing wrote the last, as six years before he had written the first, of the series. This concluding article is a review of a book by a Herr Meinhard on "The character and the works of the best Italian poets;" and it is one of the most genial he ever wrote. Meinhard seems to have been a man after Lessing's own heart, thoughtful, unaffected, thorough in his work, and master of a clear and manly style. He had characterised as the leading qualities of Italian poetry "vividness of imagination and wealth of images." Lessing points out that the Germans had also produced a crowd of descriptive poets; "but," he adds[1]—and readers of "Laokoon" will at once perceive in the remark the influence of the principles unfolded in that work—"I fear very much that they will compare with the descriptive poets of Italy only as the Dutch with the Roman School. We have been too partial to pictures of lifeless nature; we succeed in scenes of sheep and shepherds; our comic epics have many good Bambocciade; but where are our poetic Raphaels, our painters of the soul?"

In pointing out the poverty of poetic invention in the age of the Medici, despite the encouragement given to genius by that house, Meinhard protested against the common notion that the brilliance of a literary epoch depends upon the amount of patronage received by writers from "the great." "Like a rushing torrent," he said, "true genius works a way for itself through the greatest hindrances:" a general principle which he illustrated by the case of Shakespeare. A patron, he maintained, is

[1] S. S. vi. p. 266.

positively injurious to poets "unless he himself possesses the true, the great taste in the arts." Racine, for instance, was prevented from displaying his power at its best by the necessity of winning the approval of "an effeminate court." Moreover, when princes encourage literature, multitudes of men who have no real poetic impulse are sure to begin to write; and these, in order to seem original, adopt all manner of affectations, so that the public taste is inevitably vitiated in the long-run. These principles met with Lessing's hearty approval; and in calling attention to them he hopes they may silence "those who complain often and bitterly of the want of support, and in the tone of true flatterers so exaggerate the influence of the great upon the arts that their selfish object is only too plain."[1] Lessing was one of the first in Germany to understand that the true and most effectual patronage of literature must come from a free and highly instructed community.

The works which chiefly occupied his attention at this time were "Minna von Barnhelm" and "Laokoon." The former he submitted scene by scene to Ramler, all of whose suggestions, with the exception of two or three, he adopted. On the subject of the latter he had many conversations with Mendelsohn, for whose powers of philosophical speculation he continued to have the highest respect. Although the most original thinker of his time, Lessing was not one of those who shut themselves up within the narrow circle of their own ideas. In the contact of mind with mind he found to the last one of his chief pleasures, and the best means of preserving his intellectual fervour and freshness.

He maintained, however, absolute independence, and would not even associate himself with his friends in an enterprise which they now began, and which became better known than any other literary undertaking of the kind published in Germany in the eighteenth century. This was the "General German Library" ("Die Allgemeine Deutsche Bibliothek"), of which Nicolai was the editor

[1] S. S. vi. p. 268.

and publisher, and for which he obtained contributions from many of the best writers in the country. It was essentially critical; and Nicolai's aim was to make it an organ of common sense applied to every department of thought, but especially to literature, art, and theology. It long remained a powerful influence, giving to the ideas of the "enlightened" philosophers the most popular forms of which they were capable. It ultimately became shallow, intolerant, and pretentious, but in its early days it met, not altogether inadequately, a true need of the community. Nicolai often urged Lessing to write for it; and he had been so long famous as the chief of the Berlin critics, that it was generally believed he was the principal contributor. Henceforth, however, he stood aloof from all other workers, going on his own way alone.

CHAPTER XI.

"MINNA VON BARNHELM."

LESSING did not deceive himself when, in writing to Ramler, he indicated his belief that "Minna von Barnhelm; or, The Soldier's Fortune" ("Minna von Barnhelm; oder Das Soldatenglück"), would surpass all his previous dramatic writings. From the best of these it is separated by a wide gulf. It displays a vividness of conception, a delicacy of touch, a mastery of the resources of dramatic art, for which we should look in vain in "Miss Sara Sampson" or his earlier comedies. And there is no longer any trace of foreign influence. It is true that "Minna" was written under the impulse communicated by Diderot; but this impulse, it need hardly be said, did not reveal itself in imitation of the Frenchman's ideas or style. What Diderot did for Lessing was this: he helped him to look within for the sources of inspiration, deepened his assurance that he would be most effective by being perfectly true to himself.

It is said that the play was suggested by an incident which occurred in an inn at Breslau during Lessing's residence there. During the Seven Years' War, Tellheim, a major in a Prussian regiment of Free Lances, is stationed for a time in a district of Saxony, and receives orders to levy from the inhabitants a large contribution. They are unable to raise the whole sum, and Tellheim, pitying their distress, advances the sum by which they are deficient, receiving from the local authorities bills to be paid through the Prussian war treasury after the conclusion of peace. Minna von Barnhelm, a young lady of the neighbourhood,

residing on the estates of the Count von Bruchsall, her uncle, whose heiress she is, hears of this splendid deed, is struck with admiration, and gladly goes to the first social gathering at which Tellheim is to be present. Acquaintance soon ripens into passion, and although their countries are at war, they exchange the rings of betrothed lovers.

The war at an end, Tellheim is discharged, and his affairs fall into confusion. He presents the bills at the war treasury in Berlin, but, to his astonishment and horror, not only are they not honoured, he is laughed at when he asserts that they represent money he has actually paid. He is accused of having obtained them as a reward for receiving from the Saxon authorities the very smallest sum with which his superiors would be satisfied. Bitterly resenting the wrong inflicted upon him, he decides, although his love is undiminished, that his honour will not allow him again to see Minna until his reputation is cleared. He remains moodily at an inn in Berlin, attended by Just, the only servant he can now keep.

Minna, who loves Tellheim with her whole soul, is perplexed by his silence. Never doubting his loyalty, she concludes that he must be in trouble, and at last determines to go in search of him. Accompanied by her uncle and Franciska, her maid, she accordingly starts for Berlin. Within a day's journey of that city their carriage breaks down. The uncle remains behind to see it put right, but Minna and Franciska go on, alighting, as it happens, at the inn in which Tellheim is residing. As he has been unable for some time to pay the landlord, the latter, taking advantage of his temporary absence, gives his room to the young lady, setting apart an inferior one for his use. The action begins on the morning after Minna's arrival, these details being incidentally brought out in the course of the play.

Tellheim has in his desk a sum of money committed to him by Werner, his old sergeant. The landlord discovers this, and imagining it belongs to Tellheim, tries anxiously

to conciliate him for having turned him out of his room. He is indignant at the insult, however, and orders Just, his servant, to find accommodation immediately in some other inn, being confirmed in his resolution by a message of apology brought to him by a servant of the lady who has displaced him. He urges Just to make haste, stating that he will await him in the neighbouring coffee-house. Brought to the utmost straits, he is compelled before going to give Just his ring of betrothal, with directions that he is to pawn it. Just, who is enraged at the treatment his master has received, pawns the ring—a very costly one—with the landlord, wishing to annoy him by this unexpected display of wealth.

The landlord, who goes to make necessary inquiries as to the name of the new inmate of his house and her business in Berlin, asks her if she understands about rings, and produces the one he has received from Just. Minna instantly recognises it, overwhelms him with excited questions, and sends him for Tellheim's servant. The latter is sullen and suspicious; but the landlord offers to bring Tellheim himself, who comes without knowing who it is that has asked for him. His first impulse is to embrace Minna with passionate fervour, but he remembers, draws back, and sorrowfully tells her that their engagement is at an end. Finding out that he still loves her, she speaks to him with all her former tenderness. He is deeply moved, but holds to his resolution, and at last flies from the room.

Minna soon receives from Tellheim a long letter setting forth the circumstances which must for ever separate them. This only intensifies her love and admiration. Returning the letter through Franciska, with the pretence that she has not read it, she invites him to accompany her on a drive in the afternoon. When he comes, for the purpose not of accepting her invitation but of making final explanations, she playfully makes light of his objections; but he is deeply serious, and, full of bitterness at the wrongs he has

to endure, declares that they must say farewell. Seeing that she will never overcome him by reasoning, Minna has recourse to womanly stratagem. She affects to be offended, thrusts his ring, which she has taken from the landlord, into his hand as if she were returning her own, and hinting at some terrible misfortune, escapes into her bedroom. Franciska, who takes part throughout in the development of her mistress's schemes, then tells him that Minna has concealed the truth from him; that she has fled from her home rather than marry as her uncle desires; that for his sake she is disinherited and ruined.

In an instant all Tellheim's scruples are forgotten; he thinks now only of his love. Going to Werner, whose help, offered under all kinds of ingenious pretexts, he has hitherto declined, he asks for a large loan, thereby delighting the heart of the old soldier. Minna is overjoyed at her complete triumph, but resolves, now that her lover is her own, to tantalise him a little. He has not recognised his ring, and wishes her to take it back. She, however, coldly refuses, pointing out that she has another on her finger not less valuable; afterwards, in broken tones, protesting that she cannot consent to add to his sorrows. While they converse, a letter is brought from the King, stating that he has investigated Tellheim's claims and found them just, and inviting him, in complimentary terms, to continue in the service. All difficulties are now removed; but Minna still affects to hold out. She obstinately declines the ring, and informs Tellheim that she will not hinder him in the great career which is evidently before him. At this point Just comes in, and whispers to his master what he has done with the ring, and that the landlord asserts it is in the possession of the lady. New light seems to burst upon Tellheim. Minna has all along wished to break with him! That is why, having his ring, she will not take back her own! He is so overwhelmed that when Werner enters with the money he had asked, he sharply tells him it is not wanted; whereupon Werner

throws it, in momentary anger, at his feet. Minna is in vain trying to explain, when her uncle's carriage drives up to the door. Tellheim, who is still under the impression that the Count von Bruchsall is now her enemy, remembers only that she needs protection, and drawing her towards him bids her be fearless. She then smilingly dispels all illusions, and taking the ring from him, puts it on his finger. "Now," she asks, "is all right?" "Where am I?" replies Tellheim, kissing her brow. "Oh, you mischievous angel, to torment me so!" Her uncle cordially greets him. "I am not," says the Count, pointing to Tellheim's uniform, "partial to officers of this colour; but you are an honourable man, Tellheim; and an honourable man may appear in what garb he pleases, one must love him." Uncle and niece going into another room, Tellheim remains to say a kind word to Werner, exclaiming, as he follows his betrothed, "I should like to see any one who has a better maid or more honest friend than I." As the curtain falls, Franciska and Werner, who have been gradually approaching each other during the play, resolve to follow the example of their superiors, the former going directly to the point by asking the latter "whether he does not want a Frau Wachtmeisterin?" "Now," shouts Werner, "I have at least as good a maid and as honest a friend as you!"

It would be impossible for a dramatic work to stand in closer relation than "Minna" to the epoch of its author; it is steeped in the hues of the time in which it was written. Frederick the Great, with the honours of the Seven Years' War still fresh upon him, was the subject of all men's thoughts; and throughout the greater part of the play he stands in the background as the power with which rests the decision of the hero's happiness or misery. Tellheim's fortunes constantly lead us back to the recently closed struggle, and we are everywhere reminded of the state of feeling it left behind it in the minds both of Prussians and Saxons. Yet the play is almost of as fresh

interest now as when it first appeared, and may be read or listened to with hardly less pleasure by Englishmen than by Germans. The reason is that Lessing does not confine himself to the mere manners of his time and country; he penetrates to qualities which are common to all the modern and cultivated lands of Europe. It would be easy to mention German plays which touch life at deeper points, and which are grander and more imaginative; but there is not one whose characters are more exactly defined. A range of hills in the bright atmosphere and against the clear sky of the Levant could not stand forth in bolder or more distinct outlines.

The whole interest of the play centres in Tellheim, and the conception is one which Lessing evidently worked out with elaborate care. It would be a complete mistake to suppose that he is intended to represent an ideal or perfect character. His respect for what he calls his honour often verges on the absurd, for his honour in any true sense of the term is not in the smallest degree injured. He has been guilty of no wrong; he is incapable of a mean act; he is merely misunderstood. And although it would be affectation in any one to deny that he feels keenly an unjust charge, yet a man of the very highest type of manliness would not allow such an accusation to crush him to the earth. Much less would he allow it to stand between his enduring happiness and that of one who is dearer to him than himself. He would call to mind that a human spirit is degraded only by its own act, and after doing everything in his power to clear his reputation, await the result in proud silence. Tellheim, however, is so overcome by the injustice done to him that his judgments of men and things are utterly warped, the deepest sources of his feeling poisoned. But in spite of this weakness, how admirable a character he is! Absolutely fearless, he is tender and sympathetic towards weakness and misery; and there are no limits to his power of self-sacrifice. Even his "honour" gives way when Minna appeals to a higher principle. She

has suffered for his sake; that is enough; he will throw reputation to the winds, accept his humiliation, and, although with a sad heart, unite himself for ever to one who has been so true to him. Of all his noble qualities he himself seems to be utterly unconscious; he acts greatly, as a tree blossoms and as the sun shines. A man of this kind may provoke us by his temporary sacrifice of reality for appearance; but in the end he commands both our respect and love.

Occasionally we detect in his words the best notes of the eighteenth century. What fine humanity, for instance, there is in his reference to the profession in which he himself has gained high distinction! "I became a soldier," he tells Minna, after receiving the King's letter, "from partisanship, I myself know not for what political principles, and from the fancy that it is good for every honourable man to try himself for a time in this position, in order to make himself familiar with everything called danger, and to learn coolness and decision. Only the most extreme necessity could have compelled me to make of this experiment a calling, of this temporary occupation a profession." The war being over, and he himself discharged, his sole ambition is to be once more "a peaceful and contented man."[1] He is equally in harmony with the central currents of the time in his allusion to "the great." "How did it happen," asks Minna, "that they did not retain a man of your merits?" "It could not be otherwise," Tellheim answers.[2] "The great have convinced themselves that a soldier does very little for them from inclination, not much more from a sense of duty, but everything for his own honour. What, then, can they think they owe him? Peace has enabled them to dispense with several like me; and in the last resort no single person is indispensable to them." "You speak," replies Minna, "as a man must speak who can very easily dispense with the great!"

[1] Act v. sc. 9.

[2] Act iv. sc. 6.

Tieck has suggested that Lessing derived his idea of Tellheim from Manly in Wycherley's "Plain Dealer:" surely the most astonishing blunder ever committed by a literary critic, since there could not be a more profound contrast than that which exists between the noble delicacy of Tellheim and the unutterable coarseness of Wycherley's brutal hero. The comparison of Tellheim with Diderot's Dorval is hardly more happy; and the theory that Lessing meant to portray his own character will not stand the least examination. Few distinguished men have ever shown themselves more independent of the world's opinion than Lessing; and besides, humour was a vein that struck deeply into his nature, whereas the lack of humour is Tellheim's grand deficiency. Had he possessed a sense of humour, his sense of honour would have been a less oppressive quality; it would have been more sternly under control. The character cannot have been meant as an exact portrait of any one; but if it was suggested by a single person, the original was undoubtedly Lessing's most intimate friend, Kleist. It is certain that he had the characteristic virtues of Tellheim in a very marked degree; and being an officer in the Prussian army, and therefore subject to similar influences, it is not impossible that he may also have had Tellheim's exaggerated ideas of honour. Nothing was more natural than that Lessing should desire to perpetuate in this way the memory of a man he had so dearly loved.

It has often been asserted that Lessing failed to represent the charm of womanly qualities; but in the whole range of German dramatic literature there are few more delightful feminine characters than Minna. Without a touch of sentimentalism, she has deep feeling; she is neither shy nor forward, but simple, unaffected, never misunderstanding others, and assuming that others will not misunderstand her. Her good sense enables her to go at once to the heart of any difficulty that presents itself, and she has the playfulness of those happy, sunny

natures that see good in everything, and whom years do not really make old. Some critics have been offended by the idea of her going in search of her lover; but there is nothing unwomanly in her doing so, for she has absolute confidence in Tellheim, and knows that he will not misjudge her. As for the rest of the world, she goes accompanied by her uncle, and it is not to be supposed that the real object of her journey is proclaimed on the housetops.

A slight touch brings out the fact that her joyous disposition is not incompatible with unaffected piety. When she has discovered that Tellheim is at hand, and the first rush of ecstatic delight has subsided, she finds herself alone for a moment. "Am I alone?" she says. "I will not be alone in vain." And folding her hands and glancing upwards, she exclaims: "I am not alone. A single thankful glance towards heaven is the most perfect prayer. I have him, I have him! I am happy, and cheerful! What would the Creator rather see than a cheerful creature?"[1] And she is as thoughtful as she is good. "Girl," she says to Franciska, "you understand good men excellently, but when will you learn to tolerate the bad? They also are still men. And often not nearly such bad men as they seem. One must seek out their good side."[2]

Franciska has nothing in common with the Lisette of the early comedies. She has genuine life, and attracts us by her vivacity and humour. She is treated as a friend rather than as a servant; and this is rendered perfectly natural by the fact that she is the daughter of a miller on the estates of Minna's uncle, and has been brought up from childhood with her young mistress. Werner is an excellent type of the best kind of soldier produced in such a time as that of the Seven Years' War. Rough in manner, he has a true, kind heart, and is never so happy as when permitted to do some service to his late superior officer. The one thing he detests is a regular, peaceful life; he is really

[1] Act ii. sc. 7. [2] Act iv. sc. 3.

at home only when each morning brings with it a chance of fresh adventure. The sole question he asks Franciska when she offers to become his wife is whether she will accompany him to Persia, whither he is resolved to go, as he has a vague impression that wars are going on there. She has no objection; and in ten years, he tells her, with much exultation, she will be either a general's wife or a widow.

The landlord is evidently taken directly from life. His bustling self-consequence, inquisitiveness, time-serving, and mean worship of money, are portrayed with a light but masterly touch. Just, Tellheim's servant, is also vigorously conceived. Although coarse and unlovely, his bad qualities are redeemed by his doglike fidelity to his master. The epithet doglike is suggested by himself, for when Tellheim dismisses him, and he entreats to be allowed to remain, this is how he argues:[1] "Make me out as bad as you will; I will not on that account think worse of myself than of my dog. Last winter I went in the evening to the canal, and heard something whine. I went down, caught at the voice, fancying I should save a child, and dragged a poodle out of the water. Good, however! thought I. The poodle came after me, but I was no lover of poodles. I drove him off—in vain; I beat him from me—in vain. At night I did not allow him into my room; he remained at the threshold. When he came near me, I kicked him; he yelped, looked at me, and wagged his tail. A bit of bread he has never received from my hand; and yet I am the only person he obeys and who dares touch him. He springs before me, and does his tricks before me unbidden. He is an ugly poodle, but really a good dog. If he goes on much longer, I shall cease to dislike the poodle."

After this Just is of course forgiven. It is a happy stroke that soon afterwards, when Tellheim leaves the inn in a state of irritation at the landlord and despair at his

[1] Act i. sc. 3.

own misfortunes, he returns and exclaims: "One thing more, take your poodle with you, Just."

One character, incidentally introduced, has not yet been named, yet he is one of the most famous in the play, and gives occasion to a scene of admirable humour. This is Riccaut de la Marlinière, a Frenchman who has been in Frederick's service, but now makes a living as a "sharper." His broken German, varied by occasional outbursts of French, is highly comic; and by a few bold strokes we are presented with a vivid picture of his conceit, unscrupulousness, and audacity. The messenger entrusted with the King's letter has asked him whether he knows Tellheim's address. Armed with this hint, he comes to announce the good news to Tellheim. Finding Minna in the room, he talks largely of his friend the Minister of the War Department, and so delights her by his intelligence that he easily works upon her feelings, and induces her to ask him as a favour to accept money from her. His roguery affords an excellent foil to her simple confidence in human virtue: a confidence by no means shared by Franciska, who mercilessly mimics him after his departure. One little passage in the amusing dialogue may be taken as evidence of the growing sense of independence which was diffusing itself through German society. "Your ladyship speaks French?"[1] asks Riccaut. "Sir," replies Minna, "in France I should try to speak it. But why here? I perceive you understand me, sir; and I shall certainly understand you. Speak, sir, as it pleases you."[2]

The interest of the play is intensely concentrated, for we never pass beyond two rooms of the inn, the public room and Minna's apartment; and the action is concluded on the afternoon of the day on which it opens. Yet there is nothing forced in the behaviour of the various characters. From the rising of the curtain in the first act to its fall in the fifth, not an intention is formed, not a

[1] "Nit? Sie spreck nit Französisch, Ihro Gnad?" [2] Act iv. sc. 2.

we also make the acquaintance of a Dervish, Al Hafi, who has recently become treasurer of Saladin's household. He is not an enthusiastic Mussulman, and longs to leave Palestine and visit the sacred waters of the Ganges. He has a sincere affection for Nathan, whose unaffected greatness of soul wins the love of the most diverse characters.

In the second act the curtain rises upon a scene in the palace of the Sultan. Saladin and his sister Sittah are engaged at a game of chess. The former has all the energy, the reckless generosity, the power of imposing his will upon others, which belong to the Saladin of history; but, in addition to these qualities, he is endowed with an open mind, an impartial love of truth. So little importance does he attach to the differences arising from religion, that he expresses regret to Sittah that she cannot become the wife of Richard's brother, and that his own brother cannot marry Richard's sister. "Ha! what a house! Of the first, the best houses in the world, the best! You see I do not scruple to praise myself: I think myself worthy of my friends." Sittah, who, although less noble than her brother, has his clear, decisive judgment, and is altogether free from prejudice, replies: "Did I not immediately laugh at the beautiful dream? You do not know the Christians, you will not know them. Their pride is, to be Christians, not men. For even the humanity which, since the time of their founder, they oppose to superstition, they uphold not because it is human, but because Christ taught it, because Christ practised it. Well for them that he was so good a man! Well for them that they can take his virtue upon trust! Yet what virtue? Not his virtue; they wish to spread abroad only his name, to disgrace, to scorn the names of all good men. About names, about names alone are they concerned."

To this passionate outburst Saladin calmly replies that it was the Templars who had shattered his scheme; and they did it not as Christians but as warriors. The terms

on which he had proposed an alliance with his family were unpalatable to them; and they had consequently affected to be very strict on the score of religion. "That the knight may suffer no disadvantage they play the monk, the silly monk."

Saladin, who is in no humour for play, has affected to lose the game, and when the Dervish Al Hafi enters, directs him to pay to Sittah the thousand dinarli she has won. Al Hafi, who is honest and somewhat brusque, reveals, in spite of her frequent interruptions, not only that he is unable to pay her, but that similar winnings have long been unpaid, and that she has quietly maintained his court from her private purse. "A robe, a sword, a horse, and—a God!"—these are all Saladin's personal wants; but until supplies he expects from Egypt arrive he must somehow obtain money for his public necessities. He accordingly suggests that Al Hafi should borrow from some one else than Sittah: only, not from any one whom he has made rich, as that would seem like taking back what he had freely given. Sittah mentions Nathan, of whom she has often heard, and whose return has been announced to her. Al Hafi, alarmed for his friend, tries to throw difficulties in the way; but Sittah knows well both the wealth and the character of the Jew, and stirs her brother's curiosity respecting him.

Meanwhile, Nathan has approached the Templar as he takes his usual walk under the palm-trees. The Templar at first coldly repulses him; but the sweetness and gentleness of Nathan's words at last have their effect, and the two men become warm friends. "Despise my people as much as you will," says Nathan, "neither of us chose his people. Are we our people? What *is* a people? Are Christians and Jews Christians and Jews before they are men?" As they talk, Daja comes in breathless speed and announces to her master that the Sultan has summoned him to the palace. When he is about to obey the call, he is met by Al Hafi, who tells him how anxiously he has sought to

save him from this calamity. The enthusiastic Dervish proclaims that he is to start forthwith for his beloved Ganges, and proposes that Nathan should go with him, as he may be quite sure that under some pretext he will be quickly deprived of his wealth. The firm mind of the sage is in no way shaken by this prospect; and all he says, as Al Hafi disappears, is, "Wild, good, noble—what shall I call him? The true mendicant is alone the true king!"

It is at this point Lessing makes use of the story in Boccaccio by which the idea of the play was originally suggested to him. That story is as follows:—Saladin, having exhausted his treasury, was at a loss to know how he could replenish it, when he called to mind a rich Jew of Alexandria, named Melchizedeck. This Jew was very covetous, and Saladin saw that it would be impossible to obtain money from him except by force. He, therefore, devised a plan by which he might use force without apparent injustice. Summoning the Jew to his presence, he received him graciously, made him sit down, and thus addressed him: "Honest man, I hear from divers persons that thou art very wise and knowing in religious matters; wherefore I would gladly know from thee which religion thou judgest to be the true one, viz., the Jewish, the Mohammedan, or the Christian?" The Jew saw the trap that was laid for him, and after a little reflection, being a truly wise man, thus answered: "The question which your Highness has proposed is very curious; and, that I may give you my sentiments, I must beg leave to tell a short story. I remember often to have heard of a great and rich man, who, among his most rare and precious jewels, had a ring of exceeding beauty and value; and being proud of possessing a thing of such worth, and desirous that it should continue for ever in his family, he declared, by will, that to whichsoever of his sons he should give the ring, him he designed for his heir, and that he should be respected as head of the family. That son to whom the ring was given made the same law with respect to his descendants, and

the ring passed from one to another in a long succession, till it came to a person who had three sons, all virtuous and dutiful to their father, and all equally beloved by him. And the young men, knowing what depended on the ring, and ambitious of superiority, began to entreat their father, who was now growing old, every one for himself, that he would give the ring to him. The good man, equally fond of all, was at a loss which to prefer; and as he had promised all, and being willing to satisfy all, privately got an artist to make two others, which were so like the first that he himself scarce knew the true one; and at his death gave one privately to each of his sons. They afterwards all claimed the honour and estate, each disputing with his brothers, and producing his ring; and the rings were found so much alike, that the true one could not be distinguished. To law, then, they went which should succeed, nor is that yet decided. And thus it has happened, my lord, with regard to the three laws given by God the Father, concerning which you proposed your question: every one believes he is the true heir of God, has His law, and obeys His commandments; but which is in the right is uncertain in like manner as of the rings."

Saladin perceived that the Jew had escaped the net which was spread for him; he, therefore, resolved to discover his necessity, to see if the Jew would lend him money, mentioning at the same time what he had designed to do had not the discreet answer prevented him. The Jew freely supplied him with what he wanted. Saladin afterwards paid him with a great deal of honour, made him large presents, besides maintaining him nobly at his court, and was his friend as long as he lived.[1]

Not only is the character of the Jew altogether changed in "Nathan," but it would have been impossible for Saladin, as Lessing conceives him, to form so mean a scheme. It proceeds, therefore, from Sittah, who puts it in a manner that would not shock the sentiments of her time. If

[1] The "Decameron" (Chatto & Windus), p. 55.

Nathan, she argues, is as good as report says, why, then, he will in any case help his sovereign; and Saladin will have the pleasure of hearing how he will answer so curious a question. If he is a covetous Jew of the ordinary type, it will be no great crime to compel him by a skilful device to disgorge some of his wealth. Even when the idea is put in this way, Saladin resents it; but he is at last persuaded, although we feel that it is quite uncertain whether, in the event of Nathan breaking down, he will carry out the trick.

When Nathan is introduced, the better nature of Saladin evidently struggles against the appearance of meanness into which he has been temporarily seduced; and he puts somewhat abruptly the question, "What faith, what law has most enlightened you?" "Sultan," replies Nathan, "I am a Jew." Saladin, apparently forgetting the object for which he has summoned the Jew, and really curious to hear what he will say, answers: "And I am a Mussulman. The Christian is between us. Of these three religions only one can be true. A man like you does not remain standing where the accident of birth has thrown him; or if he remains there, he remains because of insight, reasons, choice of the better. Well, share your insight with me. Let me hear your reasons, into which I myself have not had time to inquire. The choice which these reasons have determined, let me know—of course, in confidence—that I may make it mine."

Nathan is left for a moment alone for reflection; and in an admirable monologue which he utters, a strong light is thrown upon his character. The influence of his Jewish blood is seen in the extreme caution with which he resolves to act. He can scarce believe that a trick is being played upon him; yet this seems only too probable. "The suspicion that he uses truth only as a trap would be too petty!—too petty! But what is too petty for a prince? Certainly, certainly: he entered the house by breaking open the door! If a man approaches as a friend, he knocks

and listens. I must be cautious! But how? how? To appear as a bigoted Jew will not do. To appear as no Jew at all will still less suffice. For he might ask, if no Jew, why not a Mussulman? I have it! That may save me! It is not only children one entertains with stories. He comes. Let him come!"

The story of the three rings is then narrated with striking dramatic force. In several respects, however, it differs from the tale as the Jew in Boccaccio tells it. The true ring, according to Nathan's version, has "the secret power of making pleasing to God and men any one who wears it with belief in its virtue." And, instead of the matter being merely left in doubt, the judge delivers the following decision: "If you do not soon bring your father here, I must send you away from the tribunal. Do you think I am here to solve riddles? Yet stay! I hear that the true ring has the magical power of making the wearer beloved, pleasing to God and men. That must decide; for the false rings cannot do that! Well, whom do two of you love most? Come, say! You are silent? The ring works only inwards, and not outwards? Every one loves himself most? Oh, you are all, then, deceived deceivers! your rings are all three false. The true ring was probably lost. To conceal, to make up for the loss, your father caused three to be made instead of one."

"Splendid, splendid," interrupts Saladin.

"And, therefore," continued the judge, "if you will not take my advice but only my sentence: Go!—My advice, however, is this: take the matter exactly as it stands. If every one of you had his ring from his father, let each believe that his ring is the true one. It is possible that your father could no longer tolerate the tyranny of a single ring in his house! It is certain that he loved you all, and loved you equally; hence he would not oppress two to favour one. Well, let each one imitate his uncorrupted, impartial love! Let each of you strive to make known the power of his ring. Let this power come to your aid with

gentleness, with hearty peacefulness, with well-doing, with the most inward devotion to God. And then, if the powers of the gems reveal themselves with your children's children, I invite you again, thousands and thousands of years hence, before this tribunal. Then a wiser man than I will occupy this tribunal, and speak. Go!"

In the "Decamerone" Saladin is struck merely with the ingenuity, the worldly prudence of the Jew. Here he is penetrated by the truth of Nathan's answer, deeply impressed by the nobleness of character that shines through his words. "Saladin," begins Nathan, "if you feel that you are this wiser promised judge"——"I, dust? I, nothing?—O God!" the Sultan exclaims, as he springs up and seizes the hand of the sage, adding: "Nathan, dear Nathan! the thousands and thousands of years of your judge have not yet passed. His tribunal is not mine. Go! go! but be my friend!"

Instead of the Sultan revealing his necessities, Nathan begs as a favour that his wealth may be used; whereupon Saladin is about to confess with regret his original purpose. Nathan interrupts him, however, and affects to believe that the Sultan had only meant to ask him for the loan of money. To recall the Templar to the memory of Saladin, who had altogether forgotten him, Nathan mentions his name, and tells of the courage with which he had saved Recha. The Sultan is pleased that one who so closely resembles his brother should have acted so worthily, and begs Nathan to bring the young man to the palace that Sittah may also see him.

Meanwhile, the Templar had gone to Nathan's house and seen Recha. Filled with sudden passion, and afraid to trust himself long near her, he had soon rushed from her presence. When he meets Nathan, the latter asks him how Recha has impressed him. He cannot conceal his love, and falls upon Nathan's neck with the cry, "My father!" Nathan, however, has been startled by a resemblance in the Templar to Wolf von Filneck, Recha's

father, as striking as that which induced the Sultan to spare his life. He, therefore, to the Templar's surprise, ultimately to his indignation, receives this unexpected advance coldly.

Daja is in the secret of Recha's birth, and being horrified at the thought of a Christian passing as the daughter of a Jew, often alarms Nathan by threatening to reveal it. Wishing to secure the marriage of her young mistress with the Templar, she goes to the latter and tells him that Recha is of Christian origin and is baptized. He is already angry with Nathan, and now—for the time—looks upon him as a base impostor. Instead of accompanying Nathan to the palace, as he has promised to do, he proceeds to the Patriarch of Jerusalem to ask counsel.

No character in the play has more true life than this narrow-minded and bloodthirsty priest. He delights in the pomp and circumstance of office, and instead of uttering words of kindly charity, he breathes out threatenings and slaughter against the enemies of the faith. The Templar, without suggesting that he is speaking of a reality, puts a case to him like that of Nathan, and asks how he would regard it. The Patriarch is horrified. Bring up a baptized child as if she were a Jew's daughter! Still worse, bring her up in no positive faith whatever! The idea is monstrous. If there is such a Jew, he must be burned.' And the pious zealot stamps and rages until he convinces himself that it is no imaginary tale. He will go to Saladin and demand justice. Saladin is bound by treaty to protect the Christians; and at any rate, he declares, "I shall easily persuade him how dangerous it is for the State to believe nothing! All social ties are unloosed, are torn, if men believe nothing!"

This display of Christian ferocity recalls the Templar to himself, and he hastens away. The Patriach, however, sends forth the Lay Brother to make inquiries; and he, having been eighteen years before groom to Wolf von Filneck, remembers to have carried to Nathan an infant of

whom he has never since heard. He goes to Nathan, and one of the most touching scenes in the play follows. Nathan fancies, when the Lay Brother speaks to him, that some one having a better claim is now about to take from him the treasure of his life. With his customary gentle patience, he is prepared to give her up; but the loss will break his heart. The past with all its pathetic memories rises before him; he recalls the fearful days which had followed his awful sorrow. "When you came I had lain three days and nights in dust and ashes before God, and wept. Wept? Expostulated with God, raged, stormed, cursed myself and the world; vowed the most implacable hatred to Christendom. Gradually reason came to me again. It spoke with soft voice: 'And yet God exists! Yet that also was God's decree! Well! come! Exercise what you have long believed: what is certainly not more difficult to exercise than to believe, if you only will. Arise!'—I awoke, and called to God: 'I will! If Thou only willest that I will!' Meanwhile, you dismounted from your horse, and handed me the child wrapped in your mantle. What you then said to me, what I to you, I have forgotten. This only I know: I took the child, carried it to my tent, kissed it, threw myself upon my knees and sobbed, 'God! after seven, now again one!'"

"Nathan, Nathan!" exclaims the Lay Brother, his natural goodness of heart breaking through the crust of conventionalism like a pure spring leaping to the sunshine, "you are a Christian!—By heaven, you are a Christian! There never was a better Christian!"

"What makes me a Christian to you," calmly answers Nathan, "makes you a Jew to me!"

The rest may be quickly told. Nathan is confirmed by the Lay Brother in an impression he has that the family name of Recha's mother was Stauffen: the name of the Templar. The Lay Brother then mentions that he has a devotional book which belonged to Wolf von Filneck, and there is writing in it in the Arabic character. This is

brought to Nathan, who learns from it that Wolf von Filneck was in reality Saladin's brother. In love with a Christian maid, he had gone to Germany, changed his religion, and married her. Afterwards they came back to the Holy Land, he as a crusader for his new faith. They had left behind them in Germany an infant son with the lady's brother, a Templar, who gave the boy his own name and brought him up to follow the career of a Templar. This is the Templar of "Nathan;" so that he is Recha's brother, and Saladin is the uncle of both.

Nathan makes this revelation in the presence of Saladin, Sittah, the Templar, and Recha. The two former welcome with every demonstration of delight the children of their brother; and the Templar, as quietly as he may, accepts the changed relations with one whom he had hoped to call by a still dearer name than that of sister. As for Recha, she clings with all the old love to the man whose gracious and noble image is stamped upon her heart. "You are still my daughter?" asks Nathan tremulously. "My father!" is all the answer she can make; but it is more eloquent than a thousand protestations, for it is the return of a beautiful nature for the tender, sleepless devotion that has watched over her from infancy to womanhood.

III.

If "Nathan the Wise" is judged according to ordinary dramatic laws, it is in many respects seriously defective. Nothing could be colder or less impressive than the transformation of an ardent lover into a brother; and from beginning to end of the work we feel that Lessing is never quite in earnest with the action. It advances slowly, and he stops without hesitation to make his characters deliver long speeches which are in themselves powerful and suggestive, but in no way bring us nearer the goal towards which he seems to be driving. Moreover, in the Patriarch we have a character who does abso-

lutely nothing to develop the plot. It would have been easy to represent him as giving full scope to his fanaticism; and had this been done, highly dramatic situations would have resulted, for Saladin would have sternly opposed his violence, and the Templar would have been overwhelmed with remorse for having in a moment of bitterness exposed his friend to the hatred of so ferocious an enemy. Lessing, however, passes by these obvious advantages, and lets the Patriarch stand as a figure whose sole function is to vituperate and anathematise in vain.

Although designed for the stage, the work must not be judged as a pure drama. It was published as "a dramatic poem," and it is as a dramatic poem written in the service of a particular idea that it must be accepted and enjoyed.

The most cursory reader cannot fail to see that the idea which runs through the whole play and determines its general character is that set forth in the narrative of the three rings. The doctrine Nathan there teaches is often supposed to be, that of the three religions one is true and the two others are false, and that we can conjecture which is the true religion only by observing the results of all three in the lives of their supporters. Such a notion was far from Lessing's mind, and throws no light on the inward significance of the poem.

The true ring, so long as it could be detected, gave to its wearer the right to occupy the throne. At the point at which we become interested in it, it can no longer be detected; it is supposed for the time to have lost its secret virtue of making pleasing to God and men; hence its wearer cannot claim supremacy over his brothers. Now, just as none of the brothers had a ring that gave him a right to dominate the rest, so of the three religions not one can be regarded as the exclusive religion for the world. In so far as Mohammedans, Jews, or Christians pretend that their religion is meant for all mankind, and is rejected by men at their peril, so far all three are false; with such pretensions the best of the three faiths may be denounced as an

imposture. Does it, then, follow that there is no truth in any one of them? By no means. Each of the three brothers received his ring from his father; and to this extent each was genuine. So every historic religion is in a certain sense divine. That is, it is a necessary evolution, under particular conditions of time and place, in the progress of the world. It corresponds to certain needs of those among whom it has originated, and who have preserved it from age to age. In a word, there is no single faith which has absolute authority; but every great religion has a certain relative value.

What, then, is the true position of the upholders of the various religions in regard to each other? Shall each strive to put down the rest, or to convert them? That would be logical if there was one universal religion; but it is utterly illogical if all religions are equally justified by the mere fact that they exist. The true course is for each to let his neighbours live in their own way, convinced that for them that way is as good as his is for him; and, so far as he himself is concerned, to realise in his own mind and conduct the highest spiritual ideals of the religion he happens to have inherited. These ideals are the sole important element in any of the religions. If a man is not patient, sincere, devout, filled with a large and noble charity, it is a matter of utter indifference what he believes: these qualities alone make him a truly religious man. And his religion will not of itself impart them. Character is a flower that comes of a process of thoughtful culture: it is the crown of ceaseless inward effort.

This idea gives us the key to the meaning of the play. Lessing is often supposed to bring upon the stage representatives of the three religions, and he has been bitterly accused of doing injustice to Christianity. How sorry a figure, it has been said, do not the Patriarch and Daja cut beside Nathan and Saladin! This is true; but it is utterly to misunderstand the poem to suppose that there was the remotest intention of unfavourably contrasting

the religion of Europe with the two great Semitic faiths. So far from being a representative Jew, Nathan would have been treated by the synagogues precisely as Spinoza was treated at a later period; and Saladin is quite as far from being a representative Mohammedan. Neither believes in his religion as the absolute religion of humanity; each takes it as the outcome of particular historic conditions, looks upon all other religions with respect, and makes goodness the supreme end of life. To represent such characters was Lessing's sole object in writing the play. He knew how ineffective, how uninspiring is a great moral principle if merely reasoned out, defended, and carried to its last consequences. But let us see it in living action; bring before us men in whom it is the controlling power: then it is no longer a cold abstraction; we instinctively feel its truth and beauty, and open our minds to its influence. "Nathan the Wise" was the result of a clear perception of this fact.

Hence the explanation of the dramatic defects of the play. Had he brought about the triumph of passion he would have withdrawn our attention from his central purpose. That the idea of the poem should lose none of its impressiveness it was necessary that nothing should stand between it and us; that its rays should stream down upon perfectly undisturbed minds. The action might advance slowly; but so much the better if thereby the reader could be aided to a fuller appreciation of the thought everywhere shining out through the deeds and words of the characters. If the Patriarch did nothing to quicken the progress of the tale, he would be not the less serviceable as a foil to Saladin and Nathan. This theory is in full accord with Lessing's own account of the play. "If it is said," he wrote in what he intended to be a preface for a second edition, "that this piece teaches that among all sorts of people there have long been men who have disregarded all revealed religions and have yet been good men; if it is added that my intention has evidently been to represent such men in a less

repulsive light than that in which the Christian mob has usually looked upon them: I should not have much to urge against that view." [1]

In the same preface he defends himself for having sought among Jews and Mohammedans the kind of characters he wished to represent. "Jews and Mussulmans were then the only learned men; the disadvantages which revealed religions bring to the human race can never have been so striking to a reasonable man as at the time of the Crusades; and there are not wanting hints among the historians that such a reasonable man was to be found in a Sultan."

Lessing thoroughly achieves his object, for although the characters are conceived with reference to a definite principle, they are true men and women, and excite a living interest in their destinies. It is usually said that Nathan is simply his friend Mendelssohn idealised; but except that Nathan is a Jew there is nothing to indicate this. Nor is there, as some critics have maintained, any essential resemblance between Lessing himself and his hero. Nathan is a purely ideal figure: represented as a Jew partly because it is a Jew who appears in Boccaccio's story, partly because tolerance and charity are all the more admirable and striking when we see them in a man trained in the narrowest and most exclusive of religions. An inferior artist having such a purpose as Lessing's would have made Nathan declaim continually; but Lessing puts him into a world of human relations, where we find him always the same: pure, upright, with infinite depths of tender love, delighting in self-sacrifice, accepting with steady faith both good and evil fortune. When he gives us a glimpse of the truths on which his spiritual life is based, he does so because the occasion calls for speech, and his words have the light and warmth which come from a conviction wrought through the manifold experience of a long and troubled career. Such a man wins rather than forces his

[1] S. S. xi. (2), p. 163.

way to our affections; and we are prepared to think the best of the principles which, whatever they may be, have helped to temper and shape his character.

Saladin is not placed in so full and strong a light; but he also predisposes us to look with favour upon the theory of the world which, in substance, he holds in common with Nathan. If there is any character in the play who sometimes reminds us of Lessing himself, it is this fiery, energetic, free, generous, and thoughtful sovereign. In his perfect freedom from religious prejudice he is very unlike the real Saladin, who was a faithful Mussulman; but this does not detract from the impression he creates, nor have we any difficulty in believing that at a later time the Saladin of history might have resembled Lessing's creation. The nobleness with which he rises above the petty trick suggested by his sister, his openness to high thoughts, his yearning love for his lost brother, the stern rebukes he administers to the Templar for certain outbursts of rage against Nathan: these things make him live as a type of fine and disciplined humanity.

These two men, standing beyond the range of what is accidental in religion and clinging only to its essence, have thus the power to touch the hearts of their fellows. In the Patriarch we are confronted by one who cares nothing for what is essential in religion and clings only to its accidents; and the result is a bigot in whose eyes the interests of humanity are overshadowed, or rather extinguished, by those of his church and hierarchy. He has a kind word for none save for those who believe with him. For him the loveliness, the poetry of such a relation as that between Nathan and Recha is invisible; he sees only the fact that the latter is baptized, that the former has neglected to teach her a particular creed. It need scarce be said that he is in no sense intended to represent Christianity. He represents only those so-called Christians who are puffed up by the supposed possession of an exclusive privilege; who substitute correctness of belief for

purity of spirit; who, although zealous to spread abroad their opinions, experience no movement of pity at the spectacle of human wrong and woe, and never feel themselves drawn towards an ideal of chastened desire and expanding love. Without this creation Lessing could not have done justice to the fundamental idea of his poem. To understand the power of a moral principle we must see not only men whose lives it sways, but men who are controlled by its opposite. His intolerant rage gives fresh charm to the mildness and charity of the man for whose destruction he thirsts.

The Lay Brother has precisely the same theory of religious doctrine as the Patriarch, but his humility, patience, and admiration for goodness under every form are in striking contrast with the vulgar materialism of his superior. His faith in dogma and submission to authority have not blinded him to the supreme claims of duty. Thus it is easy for him and for Nathan to bridge over the gulf by which they are separated, because in spite of intellectual differences they are one in feeling, they are agreed as to the only vital needs of the individual and of society.

It is probable that Lessing intended to present in the Templar one who had raised himself as far above the narrow view of Christianity as Nathan and Saladin had raised themselves above the narrow view of Mohammedanism and Judaism. But in him the larger faith has not had time to exert to the full its sweet and mellowing influence. He allows himself, in appealing to the Patriarch, to be easily driven by passion; and his blind prejudice against the Jews shows how much of the old pride of faith cleaves to him. But we recognise in him the germ of all goodness, for he prefers the better part; and we know that he too will rise to a clearer and more peaceful spiritual atmosphere.

Lessing meant to make Al Hafi the hero of a separate piece, "The Dervish," to be played after "Nathan." This design he did not fulfil; but even the few strokes by which

the ground that likeness is what is chiefly aimed at.[1] Landscape art is thus disposed of:[2] "The highest physical beauty exists only in men, and only in them by reason of an ideal. This ideal is more rarely found in wild beasts; in vegetable and inanimate nature it has no place whatever. It is this which indicates his rank to the painter of flowers and landscapes. He imitates beauties incapable of an ideal; he labours only with the eye and with the hand, and genius has little or nothing to do with his work." Genre painting and caricature naturally follow landscape. If a scene in history is chosen for the sake of the beautiful forms it yields, he looks upon historical painting as within the artist's scope; "but," he says, "I prefer even the landscape painter to that historical painter who, without having beauty chiefly in view, paints only groups of persons in order to show his skill in mere expression, and not in expression which is subordinate to beauty."

The theory of art which underlies these sweeping judgments was essentially that of Winckelmann, who, however, is not always perfectly consistent in his definitions; and it led to that classical or pseudo-classical revival with which we associate the names of Mengs, Canova, and David.

In his conception of physical beauty, Lessing, like Winckelmann, lays far too much stress upon the element of repose. It is true that all high art produces a certain impression of calm; but this may arise merely from the harmony with which the individual elements are combined into a whole. Each of these individual elements may be charged with strong, even vehement, life. To say that the ideal of Greek sculpture is absolute stillness is altogether to misrepresent its spirit. Where shall we find greater vigour of movement than in the metopes representing the battle of the Centaurs and Lapithæ? And in figures which occupy an attitude of repose—like the Theseus from the eastern pediment of the Parthenon—the repose is that of splendid vitality, of energy which, if aroused, would sweep before it

[1] S. S. vi. p. 370. [2] S. S. xi. (1), p. 165.

every obstacle. The calm which Michael Angelo gives the figure of the Deity as He utters the word, "Let there be light," is certainly not a calm that excludes grand action. And with what magnificent life he endows the eager female figure which, enclosed by the left arm of the Almighty, watches with grave yet startled gaze the creation of Adam!

But taking physical beauty even in its true sense, can we say with Lessing that art ultimately concerns itself with this alone? His argument certainly cannot be held to prove that it does. If it were admitted that art alone can render physical beauty, it would not follow that art ought to be confined to this. It can be shown to render very much more; and it is no objection that it does so in common with poetry, for it reaches the common end by a special path of its own.

Lessing was firmly convinced that he was supported by Greek art. He knew, indeed, that there were representations—those of Furies,[1] for instance—in which beauty gave place to passion; but he escapes from this difficulty by assuming that a sharp distinction is to be drawn between works created purely for the purposes of art and works created under religious influences. The latter, he maintains, ought not to be regarded as art; only when the artist was perfectly free to follow the impulses of his own mind was he truly an artist. Here Lessing is undoubtedly mistaken. In many of the temples there were, it is true, ancient figures which, although held in high reverence, no one considered beautiful; but others were supplied with works on which artists had expended the full energy of their genius. Art has nearly always found in religion her greatest themes, her deepest inspiration; and this was especially true of Greek art in its most splendid period. The masterpieces of Phidias were all intended to minister to the religious sentiment of his countrymen.

[1] He at first denies that Furies were ever represented in Greek art, but afterwards admits that they had their place in the service of religion.

As an instance of the way in which Greek artists subordinated expression to beauty, Lessing mentions the picture of the sacrifice of Iphigenia by Timanthes, in which the bystanders freely revealed their grief, while the face of the father, whose sorrow was deepest of all, was veiled. "Timanthes knew the limits which the Graces had set to his art. He knew that the grief which Agamemnon felt as a father expresses itself through distortions which are at all times ugly. So far as beauty and dignity could be associated with expression he went. He would gladly have passed by, he would gladly have softened, the ugly; but as his composition allowed him to do neither, what remained to him but to veil it? What he might not paint he left to conjecture. In short, this veiling is a sacrifice made by the artist to beauty. It is an example, not how one can drive expression beyond the limits of art, but how one should subject it to the first law of art, the law of beauty."[1]

It is by no means certain that this is the true explanation. The problem is a very old one. Pliny and Quintilian maintain that the dignity of the king required that his face should be concealed: an explanation adopted by Herder. Cicero and Valerius Maximus suggested that the highest degree of pain is incapable of being represented, and this was the theory adopted by Voltaire. A third explanation, and the most natural, is that Timanthes simply painted what would have taken place in fact. The Greeks invariably covered their faces in moments of agony; and in dealing with the same scene Euripides describes Agamemnon exactly as Timanthes afterwards painted him.[2]

Expression is very far from having in Greek art the subordinate place that Lessing gives it. Who can suppose that when a Greek entered the temple of Zeus at Olympia he was impressed only, or even chiefly, by the perfect form of the ruler of gods and men? That, for its own

[1] S. S. vi. p. 372. [2] See Blümner, p. 37.

sake, would fill him with delight; but still, it must have been impressive mainly because through it shone the awful majesty, the infinite beneficence, the imperturbable calm of the supreme divinity. What is it that gives to the Venus of Melos its eternal charm? Not merely the flowing lines of the superb statue: These are, indeed, of themselves a source of unfailing pleasure; but their magical effect is due chiefly to the mingled graciousness, purity, and dignity by which they are irradiated. We feel that we are in the presence not merely of a beautiful woman, but of a goddess whose shape is a worthy manifestation of her divine splendour.

If we pass from the great period of ancient to the great period of modern art, we find Lessing's idea still more effectually rebuked. In the esteem of the masters of the Italian Renascence beauty held a not less lofty place than in that of the sculptors of the age of Perikles. But beauty is rarely in their hands an end in itself; it is rather a means of giving utterance to the deep strivings of the inward life. Far more than the Greeks they seek to penetrate to the profoundest recesses of the human spirit, for between them and the ancient world were generations which had passed through life under the shadow of the Church, with a sense that it has awful meanings which the greatest can but dimly guess. The feeling of a lost inheritance had been awakened in the human heart; the glory of sorrow had been manifested; rude impulses had been softened by a touch of divine pity. Art could not pass by this tremendous transformation as if it had not occurred, or as if it were of slight moment. Hence although in Mantegna, who may be said to have first powerfully struck the new key, the Hellenic influence predominates, in every one of his sublime or gracious forms we see struggling for utterance aspirations which were necessarily unknown at a time when the legend of a divine deliverer had not yet arisen. Leonardo and Michael Angelo perfectly combine the ancient and modern

conceptions, for their designs have the precision, harmony, and beauty of Greek sculpture, yet are informed by spiritual qualities. While the physical beauty of the "Dawn" and "Night" of the latter artist can hardly have been surpassed by that of the goddess whose sublime figure kept watch over Athens, we seem to read the whole of human destiny in their faces; and the "Last Supper" of the former, although a vision of perfect grace, remotely indicates both the joy and sorrow which have stirred Western society to its depths.

It cannot, then, be said that outward beauty is the sole or even the highest end of art. Apart from an inward world of strife and peace, rapture and despair, it could give us but momentary pleasure; it receives a charm that never fades only when it is made the medium of revealing that which is of deeper meaning and more enduring interest than itself. The sculptor or painter who contents himself with imitating beautiful lines is but at the threshold of true art. To be genuinely great his mind must be possessed by a great idea: an idea which he will be able to embody in its original strength and purity in proportion to the loftiness of his genius and the perfection of his culture.

The utmost we can say is that physical beauty is an essential condition of the highest artistic achievement. Greatness of soul, sweetness, meek piety, energy, passion: these, in the actual world, are often associated with mean and ungainly forms. But in the ideal world they dwell in shapes rendered fit for them by beauty. We long to see the discord between the outward and the inward broken: to see the two spheres brought into noble harmony. The problem is not solved by feeling being softened down until its expression becomes compatible with physical beauty. The artist who is strong enough to achieve the greatest triumphs gives feeling as well as beauty its full rights; emotion which cannot be allied to beauty he leaves alone, in conceiving his most splendid works, as outside his range.

If physical beauty is not the sole end of the artist, we shall not only allow that expression has a high and great place in his scheme, but portraiture, genre painting, historical painting, and landscape painting may be restored to the position from which Lessing removes them. The last, indeed, he was not compelled to displace even by his own principles. For while it is true that the human body supplies the artist with more and higher ideals than nature, it is not true that landscape is incapable of ideal treatment. No one since Turner would say that it is; and the splendid qualities of Claude might have been expected to make Lessing express himself somewhat more cautiously. All landscape painting of enduring value is ideal. The artist does not reflect on his canvas the exact appearances he observes; he selects among the multitude those which are adapted to his purpose. And if there are many phenomena in nature which he cannot refine or purify but must only humbly imitate, he at any rate interweaves those he appropriates into a general scheme, and brings them under the influence of a dominant sentiment.

As to portraiture, it is enough if, in accordance with Lessing's definition, it presents us with "the ideal of an individual person." A portrait, however, which does this does a great deal more. Who does not see in many of the busts of great men which have come down to us from antiquity, magnificent types of human character? We do not exhaust the meaning of the gracious forms imaged by Reynolds and Gainsborough when we learn the names of the beauties they represent.

One who walks through the gallery of historical paintings at Versailles will almost feel inclined to agree with Lessing in his opinion of the whole class to which they belong. The historical painter is too often merely a man who tickles national vanity and fosters the most baneful of all tastes: the popular love for war. Yet there are historical paintings—it may be allowed to mention the picture by Lessing's grand-nephew, representing Huss in the presence

of certain cardinals and bishops at Constance[1]—which, although they give us no figures of ideal beauty, excite the pleasure that arises from the recognition of great human qualities. Such pictures, be our definition of art what it may, bear with them their own justification.

It is not at all certain that genre painting and caricature held even among the Greeks the low rank Lessing ascribes to them. "Even the Greeks," he says,[2] "had their Pauson, their Piræicus.[3] They had them, but let them experience stern justice. Pauson, who kept himself even beneath the beauty of common nature, whose low taste liked best to express the faulty and the ugly in the human form, lived in the most despised poverty. And Piræicus, who painted with all the diligence of a Dutch artist barbers' shops, dirty workrooms, donkeys and kitchen vegetables, as if such things had so much charm in nature and were so seldom to be seen, received the nickname of the *Rhopographh*, the filth painter." *Rhopographia*—which has not nearly so strong a meaning as Lessing indicates—seems to have been merely the usual name for the style of painting cultivated by Piræicus; and it does not necessarily imply that the style was deemed outside the scope of art. Pauson, who was apparently a caricaturist, is, indeed, said to have been poor; but it is going too far to conclude either that he was poor because his art was despised, or that caricature generally was condemned. In a note Lessing alludes to the passage in the "Politics" in which Aristotle says that young persons ought not to be allowed to see his works, since it is desirable that their imagination should not be accustomed to what is ugly. But a philosopher may forbid to youth what he does not think unsuited to a more advanced age.

Whatever may have been the opinion of the Greeks, it is

[1] This painting is in the Städel Kunst Institut, Frankfurt, where there are also several fine landscapes by the same artist.

[2] S. S. p. vi. 369.

[3] In "Laokoon" the name is printed Pyreicus; but this, as Blümner has shown, is a mere misprint.

a sufficient justification both of caricature and genre painting that each age has its own needs. There is no reason why Teniers and Hogarth should not give pleasure to one whose chief delight is in the Elgin marbles. The idealist and the realist do not in any sense compete with one another; each, if he is master of his craft, satisfies us, but satisfies us in his own way.

III.

We have seen that art, inasmuch as its materials or signs are arranged beside one another, can directly represent only things which exist or whose parts exist beside one another. It does not, however, follow that it may not indirectly represent the successive as well as the coexisting. Bodies exist not only in space but in time. "They continue to exist, and every moment of their duration they may assume a new appearance, and enter into a new relation. Each of these momentary appearances and relations is the result of one that has gone before and may be the cause of one that comes after, and may, therefore, be the centre of an action. Consequently painting [art] may imitate actions, but only suggestively, through bodies." [1]

Taking the word "action" in its more strict sense as a series of changes directed towards an end, he divides actions into two classes: simple and collective. The former are a series of changes in the same body; the latter a series of changes partaken in by different bodies. A simple action can be seen only if we follow its course in time; hence it cannot be treated by art. But the bodies taking part in a collective action are distributed in space; and although we can see them only one after the other, still—assuming, of course, that the number is not too great—we see them so quickly that we seem to perceive them as a whole at once. A collective action, therefore, is within the range of art. From the fact that we seem to

[1] S. S. vi. p. 439.

see the bodies as a whole it necessarily follows that the artist must be more attentive to the whole than to the parts. This rule obviously condemns a vast number of modern pictures. Lessing finds it violated in the "Last Judgment" of Michael Angelo. "To say nothing of all that this picture must lose from the point of view of the sublime through the reduced dimensions, it is not capable of a beautiful arrangement which can at once strike the eye; and the too numerous figures, however skilful and artistic each is in itself, confuse and weary the eye."[1]

In representing an action, it is not physically impossible for an artist to image it at different stages in its progress; but this is incompatible with a true artistic result. Take, for instance, the picture in which Titian has painted the whole history of the prodigal son. In commenting on this, Richardson had said that the mistake was like that of a bad dramatist who represents an action going over many years; but Lessing insists that the fault is much more serious. For, first, the painter has not the means possessed by the poet of securing the help of our imagination in regard to the outraged unities of time and place. Second, as we overlook everything at once in the painting, all the different places become one place, the different times one time: in the drama some interval elapses before we go from Egypt to Rome, before the hero, who marries in the first act, has grown-up children. Third, the unity of the hero is lost in the work of art. As we look over the picture we see him more than once, which produces a most unnatural impression.[2]

The artist, then, is prevented by the limits of his art from presenting an action in its whole course. He is compelled to select a particular moment in its progress. Sir Joshua Reynolds, writing in 1771, a few years after the appearance of the "Laokoon" (of which he certainly never heard), said: "A painter must compensate the natural deficiencies of art. He has but one sentence to utter, but one moment

[1] S. S. xi. (1), p. 170. [2] S. S. xi. (1), p. 157.

to exhibit." Seven years later the same writer, who was hardly less distinguished as an art critic than as an artist, pointed out that "what is done by painting must be done at one blow: curiosity has received at once all the satisfaction it can ever have."[1]

There is only one extension which Lessing allows to this principle. The artist may make use of more than a single moment if the two or three moments he selects may be thought as one. For instance, he expresses approval—after Mengs—of the device by which Raphael frequently enables us to perceive by the folds of the drapery the immediately preceding position of the limbs.

If art is confined to a single moment in representing an action, it must choose, says Lessing, "the most fruitful," "the most pregnant" moment. What moment is this? Lessing replies, "that which allows free play to the imagination." "The more we see the more we must be able to add by thought. The more we add by thought the more must we believe ourselves to see."[2] Or as he elsewhere puts it, the true moment for the artist is the one which renders most intelligible that which goes before and that

[1] Long before Lessing or Sir Joshua Reynolds, Shaftesbury had laid down the same law: "'Tis evident, that every Master in Painting, when he has made choice of the determinate Date or Point of Time, according to which he wou'd represent his History, is afterwards debar'd the taking advantage from any other Action than that which is immediately present, and belonging to that single Instant he describes. For if he passes the present only for a moment, he may as well pass it for many years. And by this reckoning he may with as good right repeat the same figure several times over, and in one and the same Picture represent Hercules in his Cradle, struggling with the Serpents; and the same Hercules of full Age, fighting with the *Hydra*, with *Anteus*, and with *Cerberus*: which wou'd prove a mere confus'd Heap, or Knot of Pieces, and not a single intire *Piece*, or *Tablature*, of the historical kind." —*A Notion of the Historical Draught or Tablature*, &c., § 7. The same idea occurs in Dubos, Webb, and Harris.

[2] "The subjects of poetry, to which the genius of painting is not adapted, are, all actions, whose whole is of so lengthened a duration, that no point of time, in any part of that whole, can be given fit for painting; neither in its beginning, which will teach what is subsequent; nor in its end, which will teach what is previous; nor in its middle, which will declare both the previous and the subsequent."—*The Works of James Harris*, p. 36.

which comes after. Hence he will not allow that it is lawful, in imaging strong passion, to take it at its highest point. "Beyond this there is nothing, and to show the eye the uttermost verge is to bind the wings of Fancy, and to compel her, since she cannot go beyond the impression on the senses, to occupy herself with weaker images, beyond which is the visible fulness of expression which she shuns as her boundary."[1]

Hegel goes still farther, maintaining that the true moment is at the very beginning of an action. Limits of this kind are, however, purely arbitrary. To what higher development could the passion of Niobe be driven? Yet will it be said that a more fruitful, a more pregnant moment could be selected? The only law which can be safely laid down is that the moment of the artist shall be the one in which the chosen subject yields the noblest and most significant forms it is capable of suggesting. In a single instant, if possible, the experience of a life should be concentrated, the utmost possibilities of beauty transformed into reality. Sometimes this moment will be at the beginning, sometimes at the middle, sometimes at the crisis of an action; sometimes when an action is past, and we are allowed to witness only its results.

Lessing insists that art should not only choose the most pregnant moment, but should hold aloof from incidents of a purely transitory nature: that is, incidents which cannot be conceived except as appearing and suddenly disappearing. These are unsuitable for art, he thinks, because it is unpleasant to be confronted by anything as an enduring phenomenon which we know would in nature instantly come and go. "La Mettrie, who allowed himself to be painted and engraved as a second Demokritus, laughs only the first time you see him. Look at him repeatedly, and the philosopher becomes a fool, his laugh a grin."[2]

But what could be more transitory than the position of many of the horses and horsemen in the Panathenaic pro-

[1] S. S. vi. p. 375. [2] S. S. vi. p. 376.

cession on the Parthenon frieze, or of the youths who are hurriedly throwing on their robes in order to join their comrades? Could anything be more evanescent than the attitude of Marsyas—after Myron—as he starts back in momentary rapture at sight of the flute which Athena has flung on the ground? It has been assumed in a moment, and in a moment will give way to a fresh posture. The Disk-thrower, after the same sculptor, could not for more than an instant occupy the position in which, in marble, he lives from age to age. The "Bathing Soldiers" of Michael Angelo have been startled by a sudden summons into rapid movement; and there is not one of them who will not immediately be in a new attitude. In the noble drawing by Mantegna in which Judith is in the act of dropping the head of Holofernes into a bag held by a slave, the fingers have but to relax their hold and the action is complete. Evanescent as is the incident in each of these works, not one of them imparts merely a momentary delight; and the reason is that the passing flash is made the occasion of a grand or lovely vision. An evanescent deed wearies us only if the figures engaged in it are in themselves uninteresting; give them life and beauty, and they are invested with perennial fascination. Artists of the highest type often associate with a quick movement the profoundest qualities of character. In the work by Mantegna just alluded to, tragic greatness is stamped on every feature, on every outline of the majestic form, of Judith. She is more than the individual deliverer of Israel; the supreme art of the great master has made her the type of a soul called to a tremendous destiny, and which does not once shrink from the summons.

This single work, slight as are its materials, would alone cause us to modify a theory Lessing states in one of the fragments: that painting is incapable of rendering the sublime. The sublimity of a storm-driven ocean, of towering peaks, of the stars: that is, indeed, beyond the painter's reach. For, as Lessing truly says, one condition of the

physically sublime is grandeur of dimensions; and the utmost art can do in dealing with grand dimensions is to maintain their comparative size. It may thus enable us to realise that if we saw the objects it represents we should think them sublime; but it does not immediately convey the feeling of the sublime. There is, however, a moral as well as physical sublimity; and the former, the greater of the two, may be as completely attained by the artist as by the poet. The "Moses" of Michael Angelo is not less sublime than the crushing woe of Othello or King Lear; and his figures of the Deity in the Sistine Chapel have a sublimity that overawes the least thoughful spectator. Blake's illustrations of the Book of Job include several pictures that are truly sublime. Indeed, childlike and simple as was the disposition of this great artist, it was in the sublime alone that his genius soared with untrammelled wings.

IV.

Whether or not, as Lessing maintains, the poet is compelled to confine himself to the successive, it is at any rate obvious that he is not obliged to limit himself to the co-existing. In dealing with actions he may roam freely over them from their first dim beginnings to their last issues.

As Lessing allows that collective actions, on the ground that the various bodies partaking in them co-exist in space and appear to be seen as a whole at once, may be treated by the artist, so, on the ground that they are really, however rapidly, perceived one after the other in time, he permits them to the poet also. Collective actions are the common domain of poetry and art. But the former, since it is obliged to note one element after another, cannot combine them into a whole with the same vividness as the latter. Hence it must seek to make up in the parts for what it loses in the whole. That is, while the artist, in presenting a collective action, must make the perfection of

the whole his chief object, the poet must bestow more attention on the perfection of the parts.

Unlike the artist, the poet is not limited to collective actions. He can follow the course of a single body in time as well as that of many bodies. The whole realm of change, in short, is open to him.

In virtue of this wider sweep Lessing claims for poetry the power he denies to painting, of representing the physically sublime. By the gradual diminution of objects Shakespeare gives us a true feeling of sublimity in his description of the cliff over which Gloucester desires to throw himself. Lessing contrasts with this the passage in "Paradise Lost" where the Son of God looks down into the abyss of chaos. Here the poet provides us with no standard of comparison; hence we are not impressed by the awful deep of which he tries to gives us some conception.[1]

Another instance of the sublime in poetry is Homer's treatment of the gods when they war against each other in deciding the fate of Troy. A vast boundary-stone which the hands of many men—the men of old times, stronger even than the Homeric heroes—had put into its position, Athena snatches up and throws at Ares, who falls and covers seven acres. The poet has no difficulty in representing this, for he makes the scene invisible, and leaves the imagination free to conceive the proportions as it pleases. But how could a painter reproduce it? All sense of greatness would be lost in the diminished size. That Lessing was right here is indicated by the fact that Greek artists did not choose divine scenes in which it was necessary to give the gods much more than human dimensions.

Homer sometimes causes his heroes in moments of danger to be delivered by a god or goddess; as Paris by Aphrodite, and Hektor by Apollo. In these cases the protecting deity usually covers the rescued warrior with a cloud. Lessing supposes that the interposition of the cloud is

[1] S. S. xi. (1), p. 185.

only a poetical way of saying that the withdrawal is effected with extraordinary rapidity. But this is very needless rationalising. Homer evidently means exactly what his words imply; and the very simplicity of the device gives it a certain beauty. Few, however, will now dispute that Lessing is justified in asserting that the device is not one of which painting may avail itself. "This is to go beyond the bounds of painting; for the cloud is here a true hieroglyphic, a mere symbolical sign, which does not make the rescued hero invisible, but calls to the spectators: 'You must consider him invisible.' It is not better than the pieces of writing which proceed from the mouths of persons in old Gothic pictures."[1] There is no way in which art in representing an action can render any of those taking part in it invisible to the rest. Poetry alone has scope enough for this.

Another advantage possessed by poetry because of its greater freedom is that it can give a vivid idea of speed. Count Caylus had advised artists, in representing swift steeds, to put forth their full strength in expressing it. The artist, however, can only express it by revealing its cause: the efforts of the horses. The poet can represent it in many different ways. If the length of the space is known, he can emphasise the shortness of the time in which it is traversed: as when, the wounded Aphrodite entering the chariot of Ares, Iris grasps the reins, and almost at once they arrive at Olympus. Again, an enormous measure of space may be adopted. Virgil makes Mercury, during his flight from Olympus to Carthage, rest upon Mount Atlas. An Italian critic had found fault with this, as if Virgil meant that the god was tired. "You must not," replies Lessing, "consider this halting upon Mount Atlas as a symptom that the god is tired. That would be wholly unbecoming. The poet wishes to give you a more vivid idea of the length of the way, and therefore divides it into two parts, and leads you to conclude from the acknowledged

[1] S. S. vi. p. 431.

length of the smaller part what must be the unknown length of the other." In like manner, Homer causes Hermes, when sent by Zeus to Calypso, to halt upon Mount Pierus; and in "Jerusalem Delivered," Gabriel on his way to Tortosa rests on Lebanon. Again, speed may be guessed from the traces which moving bodies leave upon their path; as when the mares of Erichthonius are said by Homer to "run over the ears of corn without bending them," and to "run over the billowy foam of the sea."[1]

By means of the greater freedom of movement possessed by poetry, Lessing solves several problems which had puzzled previous writers. Spence, for instance, in his "Polymetis" had noted passages in Statius and Valerius Flaccus in which Venus is described as enraged, with such terrible features that she might be taken rather for a fury than the goddess of love. He pointed out that no such Venus was to be found in works of art, and explained the fact by assuming that the two poets belonged to a period when Roman poetry was declining. Without undertaking the defence of Statius and Valerius Flaccus, Lessing replies that, in regard to the gods, the poet can allow himself liberties impossible to the artist. To the latter the gods are personified *abstracta*, who can be recognised only if they always retain the same characteristics. "To the sculptor, Venus is nothing but love; he must give her all the modest, bashful beauty, all the sweet charms, which enchant us in beloved persons, and which we transfer to the abstract idea of love. The smallest departure from this ideal prevents us from recognising the image. Beauty, but with more majesty than shame, is not a Venus but a Juno. Charms, but more imperious and masculine than sweet charms, give a Minerva instead of a Venus. An angry Venus, a Venus impelled by vengeance and rage, is a real contradiction to the sculptor; for love, as love, is never enraged, never

[1] S. S. xi. (1), p. 174.

avenges itself."[1] But the poet, who can make the gods act, can give them a certain individuality. There is no difficulty in recognising his Venus, simply because she is angry.

This solution is in substance true, but Lessing probably puts somewhat too strongly the distinction between the poet and the artist in their relation to mythology. It was hardly in accordance with the character of Artemis to steal a kiss from the sleeping Endymion; yet the incident was freely handled by ancient artists. The type of each god and goddess was so well known that everything which did not absolutely conflict with it was allowed to the sculptor and painter as well as to the poet; and mere anger does not necessarily conflict with love. The poet, however, could go farther. Apparently no Greek artist ever ventured to represent the love adventures of Zeus.[2]

Another difficulty suggested by Spence was, that while the Muses are often represented in ancient art, the poets seldom describe them with their emblems. But why, asks Lessing, should the poets have so described them? An allegorical being must in art be provided with an emblem, otherwise it cannot be recognised. In poetry the emblem is unnecessary; the character of the allegorical being is revealed through its actions. "If the artist adorns a figure with emblems, he makes of a mere figure a higher being; but if the poet makes use of these picturesque equipments, he makes of a higher being a doll. As this rule is proved by the custom of the ancients, so the wilful transgression of it is a favourite fault of modern poets. All the beings of their imagination go in masks, and those who are most familiar with these masquerades usually least understand the chief thing: to make their beings act, and through their actions to characterise them."[3]

No form of poetry, if we except descriptive poetry,

[1] S. S. vi. p. 412. [2] See Blümner, p. 110. [3] S. S. vi. p. 421.

stood in higher favour in Lessing's time than allegory. There was scarce a versifier who did not personify abstract qualities, and supply them with adornments proper to their dignity. Lessing does not declare himself absolutely opposed to allegorical poetry; but he clearly enough indicates at what point it becomes foolish and tasteless; and, as a matter of fact, from about this time the general liking for it began to decline.

Count Caylus expressed regret that artists had, from the time of Raphael, taken Ovid instead of Homer for their text-book. While agreeing that this was unfortunate, Lessing maintains that it would be a mistake to leave the beaten path; because, he says, the public know Ovid but not Homer, and it is always an advantage for an artist to deal with familiar themes. Since Lessing's day the study of Homer has given a considerable impetus to art; but his general principle is not less true. Art has invariably achieved her highest triumphs when her creations have but given form to living conceptions in the minds of the people. The same is to some extent true of poetry; but, as Lessing points out, her larger range makes her less dependent on the previous knowledge of those to whom she appeals.

V.

But Lessing says far more than that poetry is capable of dealing with the successive. He maintains that it must confine itself, so far as its direct imitations are concerned, to movement, to change. If it reveals the co-existing at all, it must do so by means of the successive. "Actions cannot arise of themselves, but must depend upon certain beings. In so far as these beings are bodies, or may be regarded as bodies, poetry also describes bodies, but only suggestively, through actions."[1]

The ground on which Lessing bases this law is, as we have seen, that the signs with which poetry works are

[1] S. S. vi. p. 439.

articulate sounds in time. When he first states the law he asserts that, as the artist in representing an action is limited to a single moment, so the poet, in representing a body, must confine himself to a single epithet: that which conveys the most vivid impression of the body he is dealing with, from the point of view in which he endeavours to place it before us. Lessing afterwards modifies the rigour of this law, admitting that several descriptive epithets may be applied if the ideas they represent arise so quickly that they seem to arise at the same moment.

His reasoning here is certainly not conclusive. That the co-existing signs of the artist can directly express only the co-existing is self-evident; but the case of the successive signs of the poet, as Herder truly urged, is not exactly parallel. If the contrast had been between poetry and music the parallel would have been complete, for sounds are the sole materials of the musician, and they cannot be conceived except as following each other. But words are not the sole materials of the poet. Except, indeed, in so far as they are productive of rhythm, they are not an end in themselves, but a means: a means of suggesting the ideas with which they are arbitrarily associated. These ideas are the real materials with which the poet works. The question, then, is, can the poet by means of the ideas he awakens present an image of the co-existing? To say that he can awaken an image of no kind would be to contradict daily experience. A botanist would never describe a plant if he could not suggest a picture having some resemblance to it in the minds of those he addresses. In ordinary talk we assume that we can by words give a true impression of the innumerable objects that form the subjects of conversation.

Lessing was quite aware of these obvious facts, and in the course of the discussion quietly exchanges his abstract reasoning for a more tangible argument. He grants that by successive epithets an idea of co-existing qualities may be conveyed; but this idea is not vivid enough for

poetry. "The poet wishes to be not only intelligible, his representations must not be merely clear and distinct: with this the prose writer contents himself. He wishes to make the ideas he awakens in us so vivid that in their swiftness we shall believe their objects to be actually present to the senses, and shall cease in this moment of illusion to be conscious of his words, the means by which he produces his effects."[1] By direct description of objects, says Lessing, the poet can never produce illusion to this extent. We become conscious of a thing in space by first seeing its parts, then their relation to each other, finally the whole. The senses perform these operations so rapidly that we seem to leap to the final result at once; but the same rapidity cannot be obtained by means of words. "Assume that the poet leads us in the most beautiful order from one part of his subject to another; assume that he knows how to make the relation of these parts perfectly clear to us; how long a time does he not need for this? What the eye sees at once he enumerates to us very slowly by degrees, and it often happens that when we have reached the last stroke we have forgotten the first. Yet from these strokes we have to construct a whole. To the eye the observed parts remain always present; it can again and again run over them: but the ear loses the parts it has heard if they do not remain in the memory. And if they remain there, what trouble, what effort it costs us to renew their impressions vividly all in the same order, to recall them at once with even moderate swiftness, so as to attain some idea of the whole!"[2]

Several examples of descriptive poetry are adduced: a passage in which Haller represents a natural scene adorned with plants and flowers, and the well-known verses in which Ariosto attempts to image the charms of Alcina. In both cases Lessing maintains that the reader fails to form a picture from the various elements laboriously brought together. Of a minute description of Helen by

[1] S. S. vi. p. 445. [2] S. S. vi. p. 445.

Constantine Manasses he says: "I seem to see some one rolling stones up a mountain which are to be made at the top into a splendid building, but which all tumble down of themselves on the other side." [1] The descriptions of a cow and a foal in Virgil's Eclogues are not more successful; but Lessing does not condemn them, because he maintains that Virgil's object was not to please the imagination but to give information.

Lessing goes too far in absolutely denying to the poet the power of vividly describing objects. Everything depends upon the genius of the poet. What is impossible to Haller, Constantine Manasses, and even Ariosto, may not be beyond the reach of Keats. A word does not call up merely one sharply drawn image; the object for which it stands is associated in our minds with many other objects, and these rise with it as it is summoned into consciousness. The poet, therefore, is aided by the imagination of his readers. It is not quite accurate to say that we take his ideas one by one and slowly piece them into a whole; if he is master of his craft we anticipate him, form a whole from his first suggestions, and merely correct it by means of his later strokes.

This, however, is true only when the object described is one of which a general type already exists in the mind. If the poet goes over ground altogether unfamiliar to us, the outlines he suggests, for the reasons indicated by Lessing, will inevitably be dim and cold. And even in treating of objects the like of which every one has seen, the greatest poets are not fond of drawing elaborate pictures. They prefer, by selecting the most appropriate epithets, to stimulate the imaginative faculty to form pictures for itself. In striking contrast to their method is the method of many popular novelists. The ordinary novelist is not content until he has catalogued with due exclamations of admiration every excellence of his heroine: her hair, eyes, teeth, complexion, and general shape. And

[1] S. S. vi. p. 461.

he is effusive in his descriptions of natural scenes. Yet who ever *sees* what he so tediously depicts?

While denying that poetry can directly describe bodies, Lessing asserts that it can indirectly describe them through actions: or rather, as he ought to have said, through changes. He illustrates this position with minute detail, drawing his examples chiefly from Homer. This is by far the most interesting, and perhaps it is the most permanently valuable, part of "Laokoon." Lessing penetrates deeply into the spirit of the first and greatest of epic poets; and it is not too much to say that his expositions started a new era in the appreciation and criticism both of the Iliad and the Odyssey.

In direct description Homer rarely goes beyond the use of one or two epithets, the most vivid and characteristic he can select. When he wishes to fix our attention on a particular body, what he does, says Lessing, is this: he makes it the centre of an action. "He knows how, by innumerable artifices, to place this single object in a series of movements, in every one of which it appears differently, and for the last of which the painter must wait, in order to show us complete what the poet shows us in the process of completion."[1] When he presents Hera's chariot, instead of describing it, he makes Hebe put its various parts together. To show us Agamemnon clad he makes the king put on his garments one by one. To give us an idea of Agamemnon's sceptre he tells us its history. "First we see it being wrought by Vulcan; now it gleams in the hands of Jupiter; now it indicates the dignity of Mercury; now it is the baton of the warlike Pelops; now the pastoral staff of the peaceful Atreus, &c."[2] The sceptre of Achilles is treated in the same way. "We see it green upon the mountains; the steel severs it from the trunk, strips off its leaves and bark, and fits it to serve as a symbol of the divine dignity of the judges of the people."[3] In the case of these two sceptres, Homer wished to indicate by their history the

[1] S. S. vi. p. 440. [2] S. S. vi. p. 442. [3] S. S. vi. p. 443.

different kinds of authority of which they were the outward tokens; but even when he has no ulterior aim beyond the desire to picture an object, he follows the same method. "He wishes to paint the bow of Pandarus: a bow of horn, of such and such length, well polished, and at both ends tipped with gold. What does he do? Does he enumerate all these properties one after the other thus drily? By no means; that would be to sketch such a bow, to write down its qualities, but not to paint it. He begins with the hunt of the wild goat from whose horns the bow was made. Pandarus had waylaid it among the rocks and slain it; the horns were of extraordinary size, therefore he destined them for a bow; they come to the workshop; the artist joins them, polishes them, tips them. And so, with the poet, we see gradually advance towards completion that which the painter could not treat except as completed." [1]

The shield of Achilles, to which "more than a hundred splendid verses" are devoted, and which is so completely imaged that Homer has from the most remote times been deemed "a teacher of painting," is not otherwise dealt with. "Homer does not describe the shield as already completed, but as a shield in the process of being made. Here also he has availed himself of the laudable artifice of changing the co-existing in his scheme into a sequence, and thereby making instead of the tiresome painting of a body the living picture of an action. We see, not the shield, but the divine master as he creates the shield. With hammer and tongs he steps before his anvil; and after he has wrought the plates from the ore, the images which he destines for its adornment rise before our eyes from the metal, under his finer blows, one after the other. He does not pass from our sight until all is complete. Now it is complete, and we are amazed at the work, but with the believing amazement of an eye-witness who has seen it a-making."

[1] S. S. vi. p. 444. [2] S. S. vi. p. 456.

What a contrast to Virgil's treatment of the shield of Æneas! The Roman poet gives us only a glimpse of the god at work with his Cyclopes; then the curtain falls, and we are transported gradually to the valley in which Venus with the already completed arms meets Æneas. "She places them against the trunk of an oak, and after the hero has gazed at them, and admired, and handled, and tried them enough, the description or picture of the shield begins; and in consequence of the eternal 'Here is,' and 'There is,' 'Near this stands,' and 'Not far from that one sees,' it becomes so cold and wearisome that all the poetical adornment a Virgil could give it was necessary to prevent us from finding it intolerable."[1]

The multitude of figures on the shield of Achilles is so great that critics have exhausted their ingenuity in attempting to explain how they could be brought within the required space. Lessing solves the problem in accordance with his theory of Homer's general method. Homer, he maintains, never intended all the scenes he describes to be reproduced on the shield. In the case of each scene the artist would select a particular moment. Instead of describing these moments, and thus trenching on ground which does not belong to him, he goes over all the various actions, leaving the artist to find out for himself the special stages most suited for his purpose.

But the resources of the poet, in conveying a general impression of a body, are not at an end when he has made it the centre of an action. He may indirectly paint it by describing its effects. It is only by the way we learn that Helen has white arms and beautiful hair, yet the passage in which she appears before the council of Trojan elders would alone suffice to give us a vivid conception of her loveliness. "What could produce a more lively idea of beauty than making cold old age confess that it is well worth the war which costs so much blood and so many tears?" "What Homer could not describe in its details

[1] S. S. vi. p. 455.

he makes us perceive by its influence. Poets! paint for us the pleasure, the inclination, the love, the rapture, which beauty causes, and you have painted beauty itself!" When Sappho confesses that at sight of her beloved she lost sense and judgment, no one can suppose that he was ugly. "Who does not believe himself to see the most beautiful, the most perfect figure, the instant he sympathises with the feeling which only such a figure can arouse?"[1]

In illustration of this law, one of the most important in the whole range of critical doctrine, Lessing might have appealed with quite as much success to Shakespeare as to Homer and Sappho. Shakespeare says little or nothing of the outward peculiarities, for instance, of Miranda and Juliet. But why should he do so when we see them with the eyes of Ferdinand and Romeo? The ardour of these two lovers tells us more of the sweetness and beauty of the women they adore than could be told by volumes of direct description.

There is still another way in which the poet can give us an idea of a beautiful object. He can reveal it to us by means of charm, which Lessing defines as "beauty in motion."[2] True to his principle that art ought not to represent the evanescent—which we have seen to be disproved by many achievements of art—he denies to it the power of rendering charm. A smile on a pictured or sculptured face seems ultimately, he says, a grimace. All the more decidedly does he emphasise the power of poetry to present charm. "In poetry it remains what it is: a transitory beauty which we wish to see again and again."[3] The idea may, as Guhrauer maintains, have been suggested by Home (Lord Kames);[4] but Lessing has the credit of having first stamped it and made it current coin. By means of it he shows with striking power what is really

[1] S. S. vi. p. 470.
[2] S. S. vi. p. 470.
[3] S. S. vi. p. 471.
[4] See his "Elements of Criticism," chap. v., "Motion and Force."

poetical in Ariosto's picture of Alcina. "Her eyes," he says,[1] "produce an impression, not because they are black and fiery, but because they

'Pietosi à riguardar, à mover parchi,'

glance sweetly around and turn slowly; because Love flutters around them and discharges from them his whole quiver. Her mouth enchants us, not because her vermilion lips hide two rows of choice pearls, but because here is formed that lovely smile which of itself opens a paradise upon earth, because from them proceed those gracious words which soften every rude heart. Her bosom charms us less because milk and ivory and apples represent its whiteness and exquisite form, than because we see it gently undulate, like the waves on the extreme verge of the shore when a playful zephyr toys with the sea:—

'Due pome acerbe, e pur d'avorio fatte,
Vengono e van, come onda al primo margo,
Quando piacevole aura il mar combatte.'"[2]

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[1] S. S. vi. p. 471.

[2] In opposition to Lessing's doctrine that the poet is incapable of directly describing bodies, Sir Robert Phillimore, in the preface to his translation of "Laokoon," quotes the following from "The Taming of the Shrew:"—

"2D SERVANT.

Dost thou love pictures? we will fetch thee straight
Adonis, painted by a running brook:
And Cytherea, all in sedges hid,
Which seem to move and wanton with her breath,
Even as the waving sedges play with wind.

LORD.

We'll show thee Io as she was a maid,
And how she was beguiled and surprised,
As lively painted as the deed was done.

3D SERVANT.

Or Daphne roaming through a thorny wood,
Scratching her legs that one shall swear she bleeds,
And at that sight shall sad Apollo weep,
So workmanly the blood and tears are drawn."

Lessing could not have wished a more admirable illustration of the law that poetry can reveal objects by representing them in motion.

Count Caylus, in recommending Homer to artists, urged that his innumerable pictures might all be reproduced by art. It will now be easily understood why Lessing insists that many of the best pictures in Homer, in the form in which he presents them, are totally unsuited for artistic treatment. Movement, progress, are so essentially their characteristics that the artist cannot possibly render their whole effect. Suppose that his description of the pestilence were taken as the subject of a picture. "What do we see on the canvas of the painter? Dead bodies, burning funeral piles, dying men occupied with the dead, the wrathful God upon a cloud shooting his arrows."[1] But Homer? "So far as life is above a picture, so far is the poet here above the painter. Furious, with bow and quiver, descends Apollo from the battlements of Olympus. I not only see him descend, I hear him. With every step the arrows rattle upon the shoulder of the enraged god: he goes onward like night. Now he seats himself opposite the ships and shoots the first arrow—fearfully sounds the silver bow—at the beasts of burden and the dogs. Then with the more poisoned arrows he attacks men themselves, and everywhere, incessantly, blaze up the wood-piles with corpses. . . . The poet guides us through a whole gallery of pictures to that which the material picture shows us from him."

On the other hand, slight hints may supply the artist with splendid themes. Take the banquet of the gods while they sit in council. "A golden, open palace, arbitrary groups of the most beautiful and dignified figures, goblets in their hands, served by Hebe, eternal youth. What architecture, what masses of light and shade, what contrasts, what variety of expression! Where shall I begin, where shall I cease to feed my eye? If the painter thus charms me, how much more will the poet do so! I open the book and find myself—deceived. I find four good plain lines, which might serve as the inscription of the

[1] S. S. vi. p. 433.

picture, in which lies the material for a picture, but which form no picture in themselves."[1]

If we turn to Milton, who stands next to Homer, we find that he "cannot fill picture galleries." This fact induced Count Caylus to pass the coarse judgment that "the loss of sight was the principal point of likeness between Milton and Homer:" a gibe which Lessing nobly answers. "If," he says,[2] "while I had my bodily eye, its sphere was necessarily that of my inward eye, I would, in order to be free from this limitation, consider the loss of the former a great gain." While Milton is of so little direct service to the artist, the Evangelists, who narrate facts with dry simplicity, have given us a history of Christ's passion in which there is not a passage one can touch with the point of a needle by which art has not profited.

When the most characteristic pictures of the poet are reproduced by the artist they cannot be reproduced exactly in their original form; they must be adapted to the new world to which they are transferred. Count Caylus advised painters, in representing the scene of Helen before the elders, to take especial pains "to cause the triumph of beauty to be felt in the eager glances and in all the expressions of an amazed admiration upon the faces of these cold old men." When Zeuxis painted a Helen, writing underneath the lines descriptive of the feelings of the elders, he did not adopt this course; he simply imaged the naked figure. He was thus true to the spirit of Homer, while any one following the advice of Count Caylus, although following the letter, would utterly misrepresent the poet. In the Iliad the feeling of the old men is only momentary; on the canvas it would be made permanent, and the elders would become objects of disgust. "It does not seem to have been to the taste of the ancient artists to paint actions from Homer merely because they provided a rich composition, advantageous contrasts, artistic effects of light; nor could it be, so long as art kept within the narrow limits pre-

[1] S. S. vi. p. 434. [2] S. S. vi. 436.

scribed by its highest end. Instead of this they nourished themselves on the spirit of the poet; they filled their imagination with his most sublime traits; the fire of his enthusiasm kindled theirs; they saw and felt as he did; and so their works became copies of Homer's, not in the relation of a portrait to its original, but in the relation of a son to his father; like, but different."[1]

In illustration of the fact that Homer aided Greek artists by suggesting to them particular traits, Lessing mentions the anecdote that, when some one asked Phidias whom he had taken as the model of his Zeus, he replied by quoting the Homeric lines:

> "Ἠ, καὶ κυανέῃσιν ἐπ' ὀφρυσὶ νεῦσε Κρονίων·
> Ἀμβρόσιαι δ' ἄρα χαῖται ἐπερρώσαντο ἄνακτος,
> Κρατὸς ἀπ' ἀθανάτοιο· μέγαν δ' ἐλέλιξεν Ὄλυμπον."[2]

Lessing does not believe that in this case the imagination of the artist was merely stimulated by the sublime picture of the poet. "In my opinion Phidias admitted at the same time that he had first remarked in this passage how much expression lies in the eyebrows; *quanta pars animi* is revealed in them. Perhaps it also induced him to bestow more attention on the hair, in order to some extent to express what Homer calls ambrosian hair. For it is certain that the ancient artists before Phidias little understand what was eloquent and significant in faces, and had especially neglected the hair. Myron was faulty in both respects, as Pliny observes; and according to the same authority, Pythagoras Leontinus was the first who distinguished himself by producing beautiful hair. What Phidias learned from Homer, other artists learned from the works of Phidias."[3]

When Lessing wrote this he was probably thinking of the Otricoli bust of Zeus, with its immense eyebrows and

[1] S. S. vi. p. 475.

[2] "He said: and his black eyebrows bent; above his deathless head Th' ambrosian curls flowed: great heaven shook."
—*Chapman's Translation.*

[3] S. S. vi. p. 476.

vast masses of hair. We now know, however, that this has at most only a remote connection with the type represented by Phidias. The only true idea of the work is to be obtained from the Elian coins with the head of Zeus, which contain a genuine reminiscence of the statue that probably realised the very highest possibility of which human genius is capable. Here both hair and eyebrows are treated with extreme simplicity; but they are not mere ornaments, as earlier artists would have represented them; they are parts of the living elements which produce the total effect. There is nothing improbable in supposing that it was Homer who disclosed to Phidias that the face can receive full justice only when the hair and eyebrows are thus imaged. But the poet was probably of still more service to the artist by suggesting the awful majesty and calm of the father of gods and men.

Every one is familiar with the impression of dignity conveyed in the Apollo Belvidere by means of the extreme length of the legs and thighs, which, as Hogarth—in a passage quoted by Lessing—pointed out, are "too large for the upper parts." Without saying that this device also came from Homer, Lessing maintains that Homer was familiar with it. "For when Antenor wishes to compare the figure of Ulysses with the figure of Menelaus, Homer makes him say:

> 'Στάντων μὲν, Μενέλαος ὑπείρεχεν εὐρέας ὤμους,
> Ἄμφω δ' ἑζομένω, γεραρώτερος ἦεν Ὀδυσσεύς.'

'When both stood, Menelaus towered above with his two shoulders; but when both sat, Ulysses was the more imposing.' As the sitting Ulysses gained dignity which Menelaus lost, it is easy to mark the relations which in both the upper part of the body had to the feet and legs. In Ulysses the proportions of the former were of unusual size; in Menelaus, the proportions of the latter."[1]

[1] S. S. vi. p. 478.

VI.

Towards the end of "Laokoon," Lessing raises the question as to the relations of art and poetry to ugliness. He will not allow that poetry any more than art can lawfully describe ugly objects for their own sake. In their action they excite simply displeasure; and it cannot, Lessing argues, be the end of any art to do this.

Is the ugly, therefore, altogether forbidden to poetry? No, he replies, for it can be made an aid in the awakening of sensations which are fully within the poet's range. One of these is the ridiculous. The example cited by Lessing is Thersites. The ugliness of the body of Thersites would not in itself be ridiculous, for a deformed body allied to a beautiful mind in no way affects our appreciation of the latter; and if it hinders the activity of such a mind, the feeling excited is not ridicule but sympathy. "The deformed, sickly Pope, must have been far more interesting to his friends than the handsome and healthy Wycherley."[1] But in Thersites ugliness is in conformity with his character; and both present a contrast to the idea he entertains of his own importance. Even this, says Lessing, would not suffice to make him a ridiculous figure, for if his "malevolent talkativeness" had been injurious to any one but himself, we should have hated but not laughed at him. Like Aristotle, Lessing insists that harmlessness (*οὐ φθαρτικόν*) is an absolute condition of comic effect. As Thersites does no one any injury, the conclusion is that he is intended to excite ridicule; and his ugliness is regarded as one of the comic elements of his personality.

If ugliness is associated with a character which is not only malevolent, but which produces evil effects, it becomes an element not of the ridiculous but of the terrible. Edmund in "King Lear" is quite as great a villain as Richard III., yet the latter produces a far more frightful impression than the former. The reason is, Lessing thinks,

[1] S. S. vi. p. 479.

that when Edmund describes himself we "hear a devil," but a devil in "the form of an angel of light;" in Richard we "hear a devil, and see a devil in a form which the devil alone should have."[1]

Passing from the ugly to the disgusting, Lessing opposes the theory of Mendelssohn, that we are capable of experiencing this emotion only through the senses of taste, smell, and touch. Lessing maintains that the eye is also capable of being disgusted, mentioning as instances a brand in the face, a hare-lip, a broken nose with projecting nostrils. Disgust through sight, however, he admits, is less intense; and the reason he gives is that the eye takes in a number of impressions at once, so that the effect of disagreeable objects is modified. Each of the lower senses is capable of but one impression at the same time, so that disgust operates with full power.

Taking disgust in this wide sense, he produces a number of instances to prove that the disgusting may serve not less than the ugly as an ingredient of the ridiculous, and still more of the terrible: especially the terrible which arises from extreme hunger.

It may be doubted whether he is right in his theory of the position occupied by Thersites in the Iliad. It is quite possible that the character is one capable of being presented in a comic light; but Homer apparently intends, not that we should laugh at, but that we should despise and dislike him. It is thus that he is regarded by the Greeks. Probably he received an ugly body that there should be no kind of temptation for any one to follow him in his opposition to the leaders of the expedition. The device of raising a laugh by means of physical ugliness is not one that poets of a high class are fond of using; but there can be no doubt of its lawfulness within certain limits. Who can conceive Falstaff in the form of an Adonis? And would Sancho Panza be quite so ridiculous if his figure were rather less bulky?

[1] S. S. vi. p. 482.

That ugliness, under certain conditions, adds to the terrible may be admitted; but the example by which Lessing seeks to prove that it does is not decisive. If Richard III. is a more terrible figure than Edmund, that is not because the one is physically the inferior of the other, but because Richard's malignity is more intense than Edmund's, has wider scope for exercise, and appears to be deliberately cherished for its own sake. Perhaps we should not be far wrong if we were to say that Richard is made deformed that his appearance may, through force of contrast, deepen the impressiveness of the fierce impulses by which he is moved.

The examples of disgusting objects cited by Lessing may almost be said to put it beyond doubt that disgusting objects are never lawful to the poet. Aristophanes sometimes describes the disgusting; but modern Europeans are in these matters more sensitive than the ancient Greeks. The scene in which Beaumont and Fletcher[1] try to give extreme hunger a terrible aspect altogether fails of its object, for their vile descriptions fill us with so profound a loathing that there is no room in the mind for any other feeling.

In asking whether art, like poetry, may make use of the ugly for the purpose of intensifying the ridiculous or the terrible, Lessing says he will not venture to reply with a direct negative. But practically he does so, for he points out that since the artist works by means of signs arranged beside one another, what revolts us in nature revolts us hardly less in sculpture and painting, and that in the end we lose sight of the purpose for which he has introduced it, and feel only its unpleasantness. Since the poet works by successive signs, he is able, for the very reason that prevents him from directly depicting beautiful bodies, to depict ugly objects. The final impression of the ugliness in the slow process of piecing the parts into a whole is weakened and softened.

Lessing is thoroughly consistent in banishing the ugly

[1] The Sea Voyage, act iii. sc. 1.

from art. But in Titian's "Bacchus and Ariadne" is not the drunken Silenus in his right place? Should we like to remove the hideous dragon from Dürer's Melancholia? Is any one displeased by the rags of Murillo's beggars? Leonardo did not think that the Medusa, in which he included all that was most horrible, was outside the limits of painting; and ancient artists delighted to make the same subject an occasion of displaying their skill in triumphing over difficulties. It may be allowed that the sculptor can make but slight use of the ugly; but the painter can so soften its effect by means of colour that it is mere arbitrariness to say he shall never have recourse to it. He may use it for the same reasons for which it is allowed to the poet: to add to the terrible and the ridiculous. Both may also take advantage of it to bring out by contrast the full significance of higher qualities.

VII.

The distinctions hitherto noted between art and poetry for the most part spring from the ground that the former makes use of co-existing, the latter of successive signs. But signs may be regarded as not only co-existing and successive, but as arbitrary and natural. It was to this distinction that Lessing intended to devote himself in the continuation of "Laokoon."

In a letter to Nicolai, dated March 26, 1769, on a review of "Laokoon" by Garve which appeared in the "Library," Lessing indicates that it is through the distinction of natural and arbitrary signs that he means to determine the rank of historical and allegorical art. Both, he maintains, make the signs of art "natural signs of arbitrary things," and among arbitrary things he includes not only costume but a great part of physical expression itself. Hence, he concludes, these species of art cannot be so universally intelligible, nor can they produce so rapid an effect, as art which is composed of "natural signs of natural things." The latter, in which beauty alone is repre-

sented, is the highest kind of art, the only true art in the strictest sense of the term.[1] But, in the first place, Lessing too hastily assumes that historical painting presents only arbitrary things through natural signs. He himself implies that to some extent expression is not arbitrary. It varies in detail among different races and at different times; but the great passions of human nature reveal themselves by essentially the same movements in all ages and among all peoples. In so far as it is universally intelligible it is in the fullest sense natural; and if historical painting confines itself to such expression, its signs are "natural signs of natural things."

The case is different with allegory. Here natural signs do represent arbitrary things. A female figure with a bridle does not mean simply a female figure with a bridle, but temperance, a quality of the mind which can be thus indirectly suggested. Another figure, blindfolded, with scales, is not intended to be taken for what it seems to be: it is a more or less arbitrary representation of justice.

Allegory was wholly opposed to the spirit of the Greeks, who loved in art as in philosophy clearness and precision. It was among the Romans that the taste for personifying abstract ideas was first strongly developed; and from them it passed to the early Christians. In the Middle Ages allegory was one of the principal means by which artistic instincts were awakened and fostered. It is obviously to be condemned when the natural signs produce no impression apart from the arbitrary things with which they are connected; but if a picture or statue is in itself beautiful or expressive, there is no reason to complain that, after all, it only sets forth abstract qualities. We do not know what may have been the artistic worth of the "Calumny" of Apelles; but the painting in which Botticelli, and the drawing in which Mantegna,[2] have fol-

[1] S. S. xii. p. 267.

[2] For a photograph of this magnificent drawing, see Mr. J. C. Carr's "Drawings of the Italian Masters," a work not less valuable for its thoughtful criticism than for its admirable selection from the treasures of the Print Room of the British Museum.

lowed Lucian's description of it, rank among the greatest masterpieces of modern art. Even those who know nothing of their allegorical significance cannot fail to be impressed by the grand beauty of the one, the vehement life of the other.

In one of the fragments Lessing declares that poetry is not altogether destitute of natural signs. Interjections, he thinks, may be ranked in this category; and he points to the "Philoktetes" of Sophokles as proof that modern poetry might with advantage make much larger use of them than it does. Words formed by onomatopœia are also natural signs; and from their intelligent use "there arises what we call a musical expression in poetry, of which there are frequent and manifold examples." The vast majority of words are, however, arbitrary; but Lessing indicates, both in the fragments and in the letter to Nicolai, that the aim of the poet ought to be to give them as nearly as possible the force of natural signs. Among the means by which he can do so are mentioned the position of the words, rhythm, and metaphors and similes. Such things as these "bring the arbitrary signs nearer to the natural; but they do not make them natural signs. Consequently, all the species of poetry which only use these means are to be regarded as the lower species of poetry; and the highest species of poetry is that which makes the arbitrary signs altogether natural signs." This highest species of poetry is the dramatic. Here "words cease to be arbitrary signs, and become natural signs of arbitrary things." "That dramatic poetry," he continues, "is the highest—yes, the only—poetry, Aristotle has already said, and he gives the epic the second place only in so far as it for the most part is, or may be, dramatic. The reason he gives for this is not mine; but it may be reduced to mine, and is assured against all attack only by being reduced to mine."

What Lessing apparently means is, that in the drama words, without being literally natural signs, acquire the full power of natural signs. That is, they do not merely call up ideas and feelings in our minds; we see, in the

action of the play, the influence of the ideas and feelings they represent. The drama is, in short, a living art; and thus it produces upon us a profounder impression than sculpture and painting, or than any other form of poetry. Although a living art, its effect would not be so intense as that of its rivals if it mirrored human life less truly than they. But if Lessing had worked out his system to its last results, he would doubtless have shown that in the drama alone is human life completely mirrored. It is given to no artist but the dramatic poet to take the deepest facts of man's nature, and to miss in their ideal rendering none of their significance. Homer and Phidias justly take their place beside Sophokles; Dante and Michael Angelo beside Shakespeare. Both in the ancient and modern world, however, it is the dramatist whose vision is grandest: not necessarily because his genius is most powerful, but because his art has the highest aim and the widest range.

Having exhausted the distinctions of the various arts, Lessing proposed to examine all their possible combinations. Of these he represents "the union of arbitrary successive signs addressed to the ear with natural successive signs addressed to the ear" as "incontestably the most perfect." Such a combination is the union of poetry and music. "Nature herself appears to have intended that they should not only be united, but form one and the same art. There was really a time when they formed only one art. I will not deny that their separation was natural, and still less blame the practice of the one without the other; but I may nevertheless lament that through this separation their union is now scarce thought of, or if it is thought of the one art is made merely an auxiliary to the other, and there is no attempt to produce a common effect by the equal action of the two. This also is to be remembered, that the only existing union is one in which poetry is the auxiliary art—namely, in the opera; the union in which music will be the auxiliary art has yet to be created."[1]

[1] S. S. xi. (1), p. 178.

The movement associated with the name of Richard Wagner, which has so deeply stirred cultivated Europe, has no other aim than to make music "the auxiliary art." It is not, therefore, too much to claim for Lessing that he remotely indicated one of the most important and characteristic æsthetic developments of the present century, although what he was immediately thinking of was the combination of music and poetry in the Greek drama. That he should have written so suggestively on the subject is remarkable,[1] for it was a peculiarity of his that after listening to music for some time he felt so strangely irritated that he was compelled to rush for relief into the fresh air.

VIII.

It is now time that something should be said of the sculptured group which gives the book its title, and in connection with which several of the laws we have examined are laid down.

In one of his earlier books Winckelmann had spoken of the expression on the face of Laokoon as an expression of calm courage. "He raises no fearful shriek, as Virgil sings of his Laokoon: the opening of the mouth does not indicate this; it is rather an agonised and suppressed sigh, as Sadolet describes it. The pain of the body and the greatness of the soul are distributed and as it were drawn with equal strength over the whole structure of the figure. Laokoon suffers, but he suffers like the Philoktetes of

[1] He may, however, have been put upon the track by Harris, who (p. 41) says: "These two arts [music and poetry] can never be so powerful singly as when they are properly united: for poetry, when alone, must be necessarily forced to waste many of its richest ideas in the mere raising of the affections, when, to have been properly relished, it should have found those affections in their highest energy; and music, when alone, can only raise affections which soon languish and decay if not maintained and fed by the nutritive images of poetry. Yet must it be remembered, in this union, that poetry ever has the precedence; its utility, as well as dignity, being by far the more considerable."

Sophokles; his misery touches us to the soul, but we wish to be able to bear misery as this great man does."[1]

Lessing admits that Virgil and the artists completely differ, the former making Laokoon shriek, the latter making him only sigh; but is this to be explained by the fact that the artist had a larger conception of human dignity than the poet? He will not allow that it is; nor will he grant that the Philoktetes of Sophokles acts differently from the Laokoon of Virgil. Both alike, he maintains, give full expression to their sufferings. The third act of "Philoktetes" is unusually brief; and this, with fine dramatic instinct, Lessing accounts for by supposing that the moans and cries of the sufferer, indicated to the reader only by a series of interjections, occupied a long time in representation. Absolutely to suppress every strong utterance of woe was a mark of heroic courage among the Northmen; and in modern times good breeding forbids cries and tears. But the Greeks, says Lessing, did not share this prejudice of barbarous and super-refined ages. Homer often makes his warriors fall with a shriek to the earth; and the wounded Aphrodite screams, not because she is the tender goddess, but to give to suffering nature its due; while Ares, feeling the lance of Diomede, terrifies both armies by the force of his exclamations. When the rival hosts bury their dead, Priam forbids the Trojans to weep; but the Greeks receive no such prohibition from Agamemnon. The higher race can weep and be brave, the lower is brave only by crushing its humanity. The Herakles of Sophokles is not more stoical than his Philoktetes; and there is no reason to suppose that in his lost play "Laokoon"—"If fate," exclaims Lessing, "had only spared us this 'Laokoon!'"—the hero acted differently. It cannot, then, be true, Lessing concludes, that the artists intended, by the suppression of violent utterances, to express greatness of soul.

Yet they must have had their reasons for acting upon a

[1] S. S. vi. p. 364.

plan that would not commend itself to a poet. What were they? The answer is contained in several of the principles we have investigated. In the first place, had Laokoon been represented as shrieking, the features would have been unpleasantly distorted. The mere wide opening of the mouth would have produced a disagreeable effect. Thus the supreme law of beauty would have been violated. To bring the face into accordance with this law, the expression was softened; the shriek became a sigh. Second, if the artists had caused Laokoon to seem to shriek, they would not have selected the most fruitful moment; for beyond a shriek there is nothing. The imagination could not have advanced or gone back without seeing the victim in a better, and therefore less interesting, position: that is, either dead, or suffering in a less degree. Third, a shriek is essentially transitory: hence an expression was chosen which we can conceive as continuing for some time.

All this, as we have seen, Lessing considers in no way applicable to the poet. He may represent unpleasant distortions if he has a reason for doing so; he has not to choose a single moment, but may roam over an entire action, modifying by what goes before or by what comes after a repulsive impression; the transitory and the enduring are alike open to him. The question, then, for Virgil was, are there good general reasons for making Laokoon not merely sigh but scream? Such reasons there were. In the first place, his cries produce a sublime effect upon the sense of hearing; in the second, they make us aware of the full horror of the destiny which has overtaken him.

But was Sophokles equally justified in making Philoktetes give unrestrained utterance to his woe? Since his shrieks were actually heard, his contortions actually seen, was not the dramatist bound to conform here, like the sculptor and the painter, to the law of beauty? By a masterly analysis of the play Lessing shows how completely Sophokles was justified. (1.) The evil from which

Philoktetes suffers is a wound, visible, horrible: therefore much more impressive to spectators than a malady the nature of which they can only guess—as, for instance, the inward fire which consumed Meleager while his mother burned the fatal log. It is, moreover, a divine punishment, so that we are prepared to conceive the agony more intense than anything that can come in the ordinary course of nature. (2.) Philoktetes is absolutely solitary. A Robinson Crusoe, a solitary man in good health, we do not pity, "for we are seldom so delighted with human society that the calm which we enjoy away from it does not seem very fascinating to us, especially as every one flatters himself that he could by-and-by learn to do without the help of others." But Philoktetes is a solitary man in misery, in the utmost need of aid, a prey to despair. (3.) Although in his fits of agony he loses control of himself, we know that this is merely physical weakness; by innumerable touches the dramatist has brought out the moral grandeur of his general character. "His lamentations are those of a man; his actions those of a hero." (4.) If the bystanders were moved to the highest degree, they would not be in accordance with nature; for the utterances of bodily anguish stir less pity than some other evils. On the other hand, if they were to appear indifferent, they would shock the spectators. Sophokles escapes from this dilemma by giving each of them his own interests, so that we do not expect the cries to arouse such intense feeling as in themselves they would seem to demand. They affect Neoptolemus profoundly enough to awaken the best impulses of his nature; and more than this we do not ask.

Thus free play to natural feelings, while supposed to be limited in the case of art, is shown to be as open to the drama as to the epic. It may, however, be said that no actor would be capable of creating illusion by means of cries and contortions. To this Lessing answers: "If I found that our actors could not do it, I should like to know whether it

would be also impossible to a Garrick; and if even he did not succeed, I might still think of the scenic apparatus and declamation of the ancients as having reached a perfection of which at the present day we have no conception." [1]

The liberty here claimed for the dramatic and epic poet is fully justified; but it is impossible to accept the arguments with which Lessing opposes the view of Winckelmann in regard to the sculptured group. We have seen that physical beauty alone is not the highest aim of the artist; and in this particular case the sculptors have not hesitated to some extent to sacrifice it, for the open mouth is not beautiful, nor is the deeply furrowed brow. Again, the artist is not bound to choose the moment which gives imagination free play in the sense meant by Lessing; and if he were, it cannot be said that the law has been here observed. The son on Laokoon's left has not yet been fully caught; but life is in the act of passing from the son on the right, and Laokoon himself is suffering his last agony. The fatal bite he has just received has all but paralysed him; he groans in horror, and in an instant he will have fallen back on the altar a dead man. How could the artists have selected a later moment? This also disposes of Lessing's third argument: that the sculptors were prohibited by the laws of art from choosing a transitory position. Shrieks are not necessarily transitory; but, even if they were, the position actually represented is as evanescent as it is possible to conceive. Much more truly than Lessing does Goethe in an essay on Laokoon—in which, curiously enough, there is no mention of Lessing's work—determine the nature of the attitude. "Thoroughly to comprehend the intention of the Laokoon," he says, "let the observer stand before it at a proper distance with closed eyes. Let him open them and immediately afterwards shut them, and he will see the whole marble in movement; he will fear, in opening his eyes again, to see the whole group changed. I might call it, as it now stands there, a fixed lightning flash,

[1] S. S. vi. p. 388.

a wave petrified at the moment of its rolling towards the shore."

If, therefore, it were necessary to choose between the explanation of Winckelmann and that of Lessing, the former would undoubtedly be the more probable. But the question arises, have the facts to be explained been precisely stated by the two critics? Does the calm on which they lay so much stress really exist? It may be admitted that the mouth is not opened to utter a shriek—although this has been questioned—but a sigh or groan may give as complete expression to physical agony as a shriek. The left hand does not grasp the serpent with its utmost force; but that is because Laokoon is no longer capable of more than purely mechanical movement. The act of clutching the back of the head with the right hand is that of a man in the extremity of torture;[1] and the sculptors have exhausted the resources of their art in tracing both on face and figure the physical manifestations of intense pain. Laokoon gives no sign either of submitting with self-control to his fate or of violently resisting it; he has been too suddenly overwhelmed to do one or the other. Out of the unknown, with awful swiftness, silently and surely has come the stroke of destiny; he feels it in its full horror; no power on earth can aid him, and he dies. This is what the artists seek to show us, and they show it without softening a single element in the tragedy.

The problem with which Lessing starts does not, therefore, exist. The poet makes Laokoon express all his agony; so do the sculptors. If the latter do not represent him as crying aloud, that is simply because they do not consider cries the most natural utterance of torture which is immediately about to pass into death.

In the fifth and sixth sections Lessing discusses the much-disputed question whether Virgil made use of the

[1] As the group has been restored, the right hand is raised high above the head; but this is undoubtedly a misunderstanding of the original conception.

group, or the artists of the poem. He decides in favour of the latter alternative. He maintains that the legend in its Greek form was that only the sons were slain, and that Greek artists, had they worked without any knowledge of Virgil, would not have departed from the accepted story. But we have no certain information as to the Greek legend; and from the fact that Sophokles made it the subject of a tragedy, it is more probable that Laokoon was also represented as a victim than that he was not. Lessing points out that in both the poem and the group the arms are left free. "Nothing gives more expression and life than the movement of the hands. Arms firmly bound to the body by the coils of the serpent would have spread coldness and death over the whole group."[1] This truth is one of high importance to the artist, but we are not bound to conclude that the sculptors derived it from the poet or the poet from them; it might obviously have been independently discovered. It is suggested by Lessing that the idea of binding the three sufferers in one knot may have been taken from Virgil, for his description implies that they are so bound. The serpents are of enormous length, and when, Laokoon coming to the help of his sons, they seize him, it is impossible, Lessing thinks, that they should at once have disengaged themselves from their first victims. Here again, however, the idea might have been found out by the artists themselves; and, indeed, if it is indicated by Virgil at all, it is indicated very dimly.

Lessing sees that there are very striking differences between the conception of the sculptors and that of the poet; but he holds that this proves nothing against his theory, since, in accordance with the essential principle for which he contends, that poetry and art have different laws, an artist could not possibly take an idea from a poet and exactly reproduce it. Virgil makes the serpents wind themselves twice round Laokoon's body and neck, while their heads tower high above him. In poetry a noble image; but had it been exactly reproduced in sculpture,

[1] S. S. vi. p. 393.

the fearful expressions of pain in contracted muscles which we now see would have been invisible, and the pyramidal form would have been rendered impossible. The stretching of the serpents' heads into the air would also have disagreeably violated the laws of proportion. Virgil's Laokoon is in priestly robes, whereas the sculptors present both him and his sons naked, depriving his forehead even of the priestly fillet. The poet could have no motive for describing them undressed, for in the conception of their sufferings clothes are to the imagination neither an aid nor a hindrance; and the fillet is of positive advantage, since it reminds us that not even the priestly dignity availed to ward off the calamity. "But this subordinate idea the artist is obliged to give up, if the chief aim is not to be missed. Had he left to Laokoon even the fillet, he would have greatly weakened the expression. The brow would have been partly concealed, and the brow is the seat of expression. Hence, as in regard to screaming he sacrificed expression to beauty, so here he sacrificed the conventional to expression. The conventional generally was held by the ancients to be a matter of very small importance. They felt that the highest vocation of their art compelled them to dispense with it. Beauty is their highest vocation: necessity discovered clothes, and what has art to do with necessity? I grant that there is also a beauty of drapery; but what is it compared with the beauty of the human form? And will he who can attain the greater content himself with the smaller triumph? I fear very much that the most perfect master in the treatment of garments shows by this very skill in what he is wanting."[1] This is one of the few passages in which Lessing does justice to the power of expression in art. On the other hand, he undoubtedly underrates the possibilities of beauty which both the sculptor and the artist may detect in drapery.

While "Laokoon" was being written, as already men-

[1] S. S. vi. p. 396.

tioned, Winckelmann's "History of Ancient Art" appeared. Lessing points out a number of mistakes in the work; but he does so with the greatest respect. The last words of "Laokoon" are: "I must refrain from piling up such trifles on a heap. Captiousness it could not, indeed, seem; but those who know my high esteem for Herr Winckelmann might consider it krokylegmus" [a useless search for trifles]. "When such a man," he had said in an earlier passage, "carries forward the torch of history, speculation may boldly follow."[1] Winckelmann ascribed the Laokoon group to the period of Alexander the Great. Basing himself mainly upon the testimony of Pliny, Lessing defends the position he had taken up in the earlier part of his work. It is now, however, generally admitted that the words of Pliny do not necessarily bear the construction he puts upon them. If, in the absence of direct external evidence, we settle the question by reference to the general tendencies exhibited during the progress of Greek art, Winckelmann was much nearer the true conclusion than Lessing. The work probably belongs to the period of the Diadochæ, when the Rhodian school was ministering in full activity to a community which was rich and luxurious, but not highly cultivated, and in which a love of effect had displaced the grand simplicity of an earlier epoch. It does not of course follow that Virgil, in describing the episode of Laokoon, received hints from the group, for although created long before, it may not have been brought to Rome until after his day.

There is no single passage in which Lessing sums up his general impression of the work with which he connects his speculations. Unlike Winckelmann, he never bursts into passionate exclamations of wonder and admiration. There is no reason for saying that he did not share Winckelmann's delight in the contemplation of masterpieces of art; but in writing of them he is always the cool thinker, who is satisfied if he detects the laws by which

[1] S. S. vi. p. 494.

the artist effects his achievement. Throughout the discussion, however, he implies that the group is worthy to be ranked with the works of the best period of Greek art. It was natural that he should form this judgment, for in his time the marbles of the Parthenon had not yet revealed the true splendour of Hellenic genius. As a highly dramatic conception, the group ought to suggest deep problems of character; but it is precisely here that it fails. The face of the father does, indeed, indicate sorrow for his sons, despairing misery because of his powerlessness to save them; but this is altogether subordinate to the expression of physical torture. The incident is so imagined that Laokoon cannot experience in a strong degree any other feeling than the agony of a man whom death in a fearful form has unexpectedly overtaken. The group, therefore, produces its whole effect at once; we cannot return to it again and again, and find that it still has new meanings for us. So much suffering, unrelieved by spiritual qualities, is apt at last to exercise upon us a painful and depressing influence.

Yet the power with which the agonies of the three sufferers are rendered would alone suffice to justify the interest the work has excited since it was exhumed four centuries ago at Rome, near the Baths of Titus: in the presence, among others, of Michael Angelo, whom it does not seem to have particularly impressed. Never has art more completely reproduced the contortions of writhing frames, or more truly caught the expression of sudden terror. The beauty of the individual figures; the skill with which, by means of the serpents, they are wrought into a single scheme, while no effect of curve or movement is lost; the harmony of outline produced by the pyramidal structure: these things, although they do not reconcile us to the absence of spiritual interest, and may strike us as somewhat too theatrically displayed, fully account for the fascination the work still

exerts. And there is one idea by which it powerfully impresses, almost overwhelms, the imagination: the idea of a world in the grip of a destiny which is immovable. and from which there is no escape.[1]

IX.

At the time of the publication of "Laokoon," in 1766, Goethe was a youth of seventeen, tasting the first raptures of life as a student in Leipzig. Looking back as an old man on that far-off time, he recalled the impression produced upon him and his contemporaries by Lessing's work. "One must be a youth," he said, "to realise the effect exercised upon us by Lessing's 'Laokoon,' which transported us from the region of miserable observation into the free fields of thought. The so long misunderstood *ut pictura poesis* was at once set aside; the difference between art and poetry made clear; the peaks of both appeared separated, however near each other might be their bases. The former had to confine itself within the limits of the beautiful, while to poetry, which cannot ignore the meaning of any kind of facts, it was given to pass into wider fields. The former labours for external sense, which is satisfied only by means of the beautiful; the latter for the imagination, which may occupy itself even with the ugly. As by a flash of lightning, all the consequences of this splendid thought were revealed to us, all previous criticism was thrown away like a worn-out coat. We considered ourselves delivered from all evil, and thought ourselves justified in looking down with pity on the sixteenth century, otherwise so splendid, when in German works of art and poems life was presented under the form of a fool, death in the uniform of a rattling skeleton, and both the necessary and accidental evils of

[1] *Cf.* Brunn, Geschichte der Griechischen Künstler, i. 474; Welcker, Alte Denkmäler, i. 322; Vischer, Aesthetik, iii. 2, 401; Lübke, Geschichte der Plastik (i. p. 222; English translation, i. p. 233).

the world in the picture of the grinning devil."[1] Herder, a few years older than Goethe, was not less impressed by "Laokoon." He "read it thrice," he wrote to a friend, "in one afternoon and on the following night very eagerly." In 1769 he published a criticism of it, opposing its most essential principles, but fully recognising its striking power. Lessing complained that he was misunderstood, but admitted that his antagonist was worthy of a careful reply. "Whoever the author may be," he wrote, "he is the only critic for whose sake it is worth while to bring my study to completion."

Curiously enough, Kant, who was five years Lessing's senior, and ultimately became a sort of legislator in æsthetic science, appears never even to have read "Laokoon." Yet he knew Lessing by reputation well, and held him in high esteem.

Winckelmann, who had been ten years in Rome, and had never heard of Lessing, received intelligence from some ill-informed friends that he had been attacked in "Laokoon." He displayed, before seeing the book, considerable irritation; but after reading it withdrew, in a letter to a friend, expressions he had used respecting the author, excusing himself on the ground that "he had previously read nothing by this learned man." "Lessing," he wrote to another friend, "of whom I had unfortunately seen nothing, writes as one would wish to have written; and if I had not heard of his journey from you, I should have approached him by letter. He deserves, where one can defend oneself, a dignified answer. As it is honourable to be praised by honourable people, it may also be honourable to be deemed worthy of their criticism." Unfortunately, Winckelmann, who was of an irritable disposition, and could not tolerate competition in a field which he regarded as peculiarly his own, did not maintain this admirable tone. In a subsequent letter to the friend to whom the latter passage was written, he spoke of "Laokoon" as

[1] Wahrheit und Dichtung, part ii. book 7.

"perhaps beautifully written, yet not without well-known errors in language." "This man," he added, "has so little knowledge that no answer would have a meaning for him, and it would be easier to set a healthy understanding right than a university wit that wishes to distinguish itself with paradoxes."[1] By an odd chance it fell to Lessing, after Winckelmann's death, to select from a bundle of letters, of which this was one, those he might deem worthy of publication. It was characteristic of him that he never thought of withholding a judgment so unfavourable to himself; nor does it seem to have made the least difference in his feelings towards the illustrious historian of art. On hearing of Winckelmann's sudden and tragic death in 1768, he wrote to Nicolai: "That is, within a short time, the second writer to whom I should gladly have given a couple of years of my life." And it was long a favourite scheme of his to issue a complete and annotated edition of Winckelmann's writings.

Notwithstanding its immense fame, "Laokoon" does not seem to have had a very deep influence on German art. It is still, however, a living power, and may be more influential in the future than in the past. That it contains, if taken in connection with the fragments, many hints by which art might benefit, few will dispute. The idea that the images of poetry cannot be transferred to art in precisely their original form is one which, if properly understood, would have prevented much precious energy from being dissipated in useless labour. How many works that just lack "the one thing needful" would have attained it had artists given heed to the law laid down by Lessing, that in representing an action the painter must think rather of the whole than of the parts! And would not innumerable ambitious attempts have been avoided if painters had remembered his principle that the physically sublime, although within the range of poetry, cannot be reproduced on canvas or in fresco? In some respects his teaching

[1] Guhrauer, (1) p. 100.

needs to be corrected and extended; but this ought not to blind us to those of his doctrines which are of enduring validity.

Æsthetic discussion has always formed an important part of modern philosophy in Germany. Kant, Schelling, Hegel, Feuerbach, Schopenhauer, have all occupied themselves seriously with theories of art; and in Vischer's "Æsthetics" Germany possesses at the present day by far the most complete system that has ever yet been given to the world. In the development of opinion on the whole subject, "Laokoon" has played a part of high importance. It summed up and handed on to the new age in their best form the results of previous inquiry; and it presented for the first time some of the problems that still attract those who are not content merely to enjoy art, but seek to comprehend its scope and meaning.

In imaginative literature it acted at once as a summer shower to parched land. Descriptive poetry—unless of the highest quality, the most intolerable of all forms of writing—had been extremely popular. It was immediately utterly discredited. Wieland ceased to elaborate the word-painting in which his earlier works abound; and Goethe, setting out on the right track, continued on it to the end, for although he occasionally does not shrink from direct description, he always keeps it within narrow limits, and finds in life and movement a better means of stimulating the imagination than in a free use of picturesque epithets. The like may be said of Schiller, who, however, rather inherited the tradition created by "Laokoon" than was impelled by the work itself. Not less was the service Lessing rendered in turning the national literature in earnest towards the drama; and by his brilliant interpretations both of Homer and Sophokles he gave the youth of Germany the first indication it had ever received as to the superiority of Greek over Latin literature, and the true use to be made of the masterpieces of the ancient world. Thenceforth the classics became to the best minds the instruments of a free and noble culture.

Indirectly, through the great German writers whose activity it has partly controlled, and to whom it has suggested new points of view, "Laokoon" has, of course, had some influence on the general progress of European thought; but no evidence can be given as to any direct effect it has produced on foreign theories either of art or poetry. It has, however, repeatedly been translated both into French and English.[1]

A work whose value consists solely in its ideas inevitably loses after a time its original freshness. Its results are interwoven with the thought of the age, and men lay it aside for later developments. We have still many truths to learn from "Laokoon;" but even if we had completely absorbed its teaching, it would retain its high position. For its worth arises as much from its form as its contents, as much from its method as its doctrine. It is a living picture of a mind engaged in the search for truth: a mind impatient of narrow forms, cutting its way to the centre of the theme with which it occupies itself. Apart altogether, therefore, from the nature of its conclusions, it has an enduring fascination: the fascination of an influence which kindles the imagination, and quickens, purifies, and enlarges thought.

[1] An English translation by W. Ross appeared in 1836, and another by E. Beesley in 1853. In 1874 two translations were published; one by Miss Frothingham (Boston), another by Sir R. Phillimore. De Quincey, in volume xii. of his Collected Works, paraphrases the first twelve sections.

CHAPTER XIII.

FROM BERLIN TO HAMBURG.

In the summer of 1766, soon after the appearance of "Laokoon," Lessing accompanied a young nobleman, Leopold von Breitenkopf, who lived for some time with him and his brother, to Pyrmont. Here he spent some pleasant weeks; and on his way back to Berlin he visited Göttingen, where he renewed acquaintance with the famous theologian Michaelis, who, it will be remembered, was one of the first to recognise his exceptional power. Michaelis afterwards issued a well-known translation of the Bible with notes; and the idea of doing so is said to have been suggested to him by Lessing during this visit. Here also he met his old friend Kästner, who was now a distinguished professor at the Göttingen university; and he entered into friendly relations with the university librarian, Dietze, with whom he often afterwards corresponded. The editor of Michaelis's autobiography, then a student at Göttingen, was introduced by Dietze in the library to Lessing, and long afterwards complained that he was much less "affable and condescending" than two "proud Britons" who happened to pass through Göttingen about the same time. "I may, however," conscientiously added the writer, "be mistaken; I never again saw the man, nor spoke to him, and the first sight, the first interview, may sometimes mislead."

During the whole period of his residence in Breslau Lessing had neither written to nor heard from Gleim. Before starting for Pyrmont he sent him a copy of

"Laokoon"—"this mixture of pedantry and fancies"—and intimated his intention of stopping for a day or two at Halberstadt. Gleim was delighted, and received him with enthusiasm; and from this time forward their intimacy continued, the good Gleim following with interest and pride his friend's career. "Only now," wrote Lessing on October 31, some months after his return to Berlin,[1] "I send you the money which I borrowed from you. It was no more than six pistoles? Truly I ought to be ashamed that I can in such matters be so utterly inconsiderate. But the books which I have from you I still need. Indeed, I needed one or two others which I saw with you, but—as if you yourself did not need your books! If it was only a matter of pistoles!" To which Gleim responded: "My books I need so little that I can spare a great many besides those you have. Is it not enough that I have books for a Lessing? Ask as many as you like, they are all at your service."

It was in a spirit far from cheerful that Lessing once more entered the Prussian capital. Although past thirty-seven, he was still without an assured source of income, nor did there seem much chance of an improvement in his circumstances. "I stood idle in the market-place," he wrote of this time some years afterwards;[2] "nobody would hire me: doubtless because nobody knew what use to make of me." Besides, he had conceived an intense dislike of Berlin. This was partly to be accounted for by the disappointment of his hopes respecting the royal library, but it was still more due to other circumstances. Frederick, notwithstanding the loyalty of which his people had given him so many proofs, had not relaxed his despotic methods of government; and the free instincts of Lessing were offended by the marks of political slavery with which he was everywhere confronted. He also resented the excessive vanity of the Prussians, which had been greatly intensified by the Seven Years' War; and the prevalent tone respecting the greatest subjects of human thought was by no means to

[1] Sämmtliche Schriften, xii. p. 208. [2] S. S. vii. p. 415.

his taste. It was now more than ever considered a sign of intellect and good breeding to sneer at the orthodox faith, yet most of those who indulged in this easy kind of argument Lessing looked upon as the most illogical of thinkers.

A few months seem to have passed very unhappily. "I have been ill," he told Gleim in the letter above quoted; "I have had to undertake repeated journeys; and I have been much occupied and worried." Three or four days after writing this, he was surprised and delighted by a proposal which seemed likely to deliver him from all his troubles.

Löwen, a man of letters in Hamburg, had prefixed to a volume of plays an essay on the German stage. He drew a very unflattering picture of its condition, and maintained that improvement was impossible so long as the public had to depend upon wandering troupes, formed by more or less ignorant actors. What was necessary was the establishment of permanent theatres, supported by the State, in which the actors should be strictly under control, and paid like other public officials for their services. In such theatres alone would it be possible to secure the representation of good plays of a thoroughly national character.

Twenty years before, Schlegel had expressed similar opinions in regard to the Danish stage; but his words had been without result in Germany. On this occasion the seed fell on better ground. A State institution, indeed, could not be obtained; but a permanent theatre, conducted without reference to the interests of a particular actor, did not seem beyond reach. Twelve Hamburg citizens, headed by an intelligent merchant named Seyler, formed themselves into a company, and hired a theatre which had been built by Ackermann, a well-known actor. The latter had gathered around him an excellent body of players, but as he had fallen into difficulties he was very glad to come to an agreement, and quite content to enter as an ordinary actor into the service of the new company. A committee

of three members was appointed to look after the financial affairs, and Löwen was made general director. Early in the winter of 1766 the latter issued a paper containing a full account of the enterprise and nothing could have sounded better. The actors were to be well paid, generous provision being made for old age; a high moral tone was to be maintained among them; the selected plays were to be as far as possible the genuine product of German genius; and in a theatrical academy, conducted by the director, young candidates were to be carefully prepared for the stage. The modest Löwen did not forget to add that the director—it was not at the time known that he himself held this position—was "a man of blameless morals, and well-known insight into the secrets of art."

The latter stroke does not prepossess us in his favour; and, indeed, there is evidence that his enthusiasm in the whole matter was not altogether disinterested. Yet one thing he did, for the sake of which posterity has taken the most generous view of his services: he was the means of bringing Lessing to Hamburg. In his essay he had called the author of "Miss Sara Sampson"—"Minna von Barnhelm" had not then been published—the best living dramatist; and it now occurred to him that if so distinguished a writer could be brought to associate himself with the enterprise its success would be almost certain. He accordingly sent a copy of his paper describing the prospects of the theatre to Nicolai, and begged him to find out whether Lessing would care to have anything to do with the scheme.

With the general aims of the company Lessing could not but heartily sympathise. He had not given up his youthful ideas as to the great place the theatre ought to hold in national life, and it was a subject of incessant and bitter regret to him that his country was, in regard to dramatic achievement, so far behind France and England. He was, therefore, highly gratified by the new plan, returned a favourable answer to Löwen, and in

December started for Hamburg, in order to enter into direct negotiations. "So much I can tell you," he wrote to his brother Karl a week or two after his arrival,[1] "that the affair about which mainly I am here goes on very well, and that it depends upon myself to end it under the most advantageous conditions. But you know me: that with me the high-sounding advantage is not always the chief; and there are some dangers about which I must be reassured before I finally decide." "Let the decision respecting Hamburg be what it may," he added, "I shall not remain in Berlin past Easter."

The managers were anxious that he should undertake to write a series of plays for them; but he absolutely refused to bind himself in regard to work which in his case depended so much upon passing moods. He was, however, willing to serve as general adviser and as critic; and it was at last arranged that he should undertake these functions. How far his duties as adviser were to extend is not known; but as critic he was to write a review of each performance, to be published by the company. The salary agreed upon was eight hundred thalers a year.

Another Hamburg literary man, Bode, having married a rich wife, resolved about this time to apply some of the wealth thus acquired in the establishment of a printing business. It flashed upon Lessing that, approached in this way, literature might become rather more profitable than he had hitherto found it; and the result of the notion was that after some discussion he became Bode's partner. All the printing connected with the theatre was to be done by them; and Lessing, who, notwithstanding his clear intellectual vision, was always apt to form sanguine anticipations of any new scheme, did not doubt that by the publication of his own writings and those of his friends it would be easy to achieve success.

He was now in as high spirits as he had formerly been depressed. "I know not," he wrote to Gleim from Berlin,

[1] S. S. xii. p. 209.

on the 1st February, 1767,[1] "where to begin, I have so much to tell you. Yes, I have been in Hamburg; and in nine or ten weeks I think of going there again—probably to remain there for years. I hope it will not be hard for me to forget Berlin. My friends there will always be dear to me, always be my friends; but everything else, from the greatest to the least——but I remember that you do not like to hear any one express his dislike of this queen of cities. 'What had I to do in the accursed galley?' Do not ask me what I am going to Hamburg for. Properly speaking, for nothing. If they simply take nothing from me, they will give me exactly as much as they have given me here. But I need hide nothing from you. I have come to a sort of arrangement with the new theatre there and its *entrepreneurs*, which promises me for some years a quiet and pleasant life. As I came to terms with them, Juvenal's words occurred to me:

'Quod non dant proceres, dabit Histrio.'

I will there complete and put upon the stage my dramatic works, which have for a long time waited for the last touch. Such circumstances were necessary to kindle again in me the almost extinct love of the theatre. I had begun to lose myself in other studies, which would soon have unfitted me for any kind of work of genius. My 'Laokoon' is now again only a secondary employment. It seems to me I shall continue that early enough for the great mass of our readers. The few who now read me understand as much of the matter as I, and more."

As a preparation for his new mode of life, he lost no time in issuing an edition of his comedies, in two volumes, in which "Minna von Barnhelm" was for the first time published. Just before the proposal from Hamburg came, he had begun a new comedy under curious circumstances. In a party at which he was present one evening, the conversation turned upon the material best suited for comedy.

[1] S. S. xii. p. 210.

In his lively, paradoxical way, Lessing maintained that any subject would do either for comedy or tragedy, since matter was of far less importance than form. "The material would be poor only if the poet was so." The company were surprised; and Ramler, who ought to have known better than to take him strictly at his word, asked whether he would prove his theory by action. "Why not?" asked Lessing, who, although he had not expressed his real opinion, knew there was truth in what he had said. "Well," replied Ramler, "make a comedy in which the effects of a sleeping cup will be the catastrophe, and name it accordingly." Lessing, not to be daunted, promised; and next morning he actually set to work. The undertaking was interrupted by the negotiations respecting Hamburg; but having settled there, he resumed it, and a considerable part of what he wrote he caused to be printed. As he ultimately lost a page of his manuscript, he would not trouble himself to recall its contents, and thus the work remained a fragment. This was, on the whole, fortunate, for although the dialogue has all the sharpness and clearness to which Lessing's readers are accustomed, it is easy to see that the play could not have attained higher rank than that of a tolerably good farce; and a farce standing between "Minna von Barnhelm" and "Emilia Galotti" would not have been a pleasant spectacle.

Lessing had a considerable burden of debt; his removal from Berlin to Hamburg would necessarily involve him in new expenses, and it was desirable that he should invest as large a capital as possible in the business he and Bode were about to start together. The only plan of raising money which suggested itself was that of selling off the library he had collected with so much pains, and which consisted of about 6000 volumes. This cost him many a pang; and it was especially provoking that the sale should take place in a town in which, as he said to Gleim, "books were of no importance." The library was gradually disposed of, and although he had calculated on receiving only

six hundred thalers, the amount realised was not more than a third of that sum.

Nothing was more characteristic of Voltaire than the business-like energy with which he attended to his private affairs. In this respect, as in so many others, Lessing presented an absolute contrast to his great contemporary. In regard to such matters he was what Englishmen call thoroughly unpractical; and one result was that dishonest servants constantly took advantage of his careless good nature. A man who waited upon him in Breslau profited so well in his employment that he was able to set up a coffee-house. "He has applied the money to good purpose," was Lessing's sole comment on learning this fact. When he left Breslau he sent on a servant with books and other things to Berlin. This humorous fellow forthwith donned his master's clothes, gave himself out as his brother, and received from the landlord the civilities and attentions due to his supposed position. Lessing contented himself with dismissing the man, and after his first indignation was past, enjoyed a hearty laugh at the rascal's eccentricity. About the time of his leaving Berlin he had still more serious trouble of a like kind. An officer of his acquaintance had made a soldier a "Freiwächter" on condition that he should act as Lessing's servant. Everything went on well for a time, but at last Lessing began to miss money, and was surprised one day to find that the marks in his account-book indicating the payment of his servant's wages had been carefully removed. When he had gone to Hamburg the servant came to Karl Lessing and demanded his wages, pretending that he had never been paid. The matter came before the military authorities, and only when the soldier was told he would be flogged if Lessing asserted on oath that the money had been paid, did he withdraw his claim. In this case Lessing was really angry, for the man had touched him at his tenderest point, having made free not only with money but with books. Among the volumes he sold as waste paper was a copy of the first edition of the

"Heldenbuch," a book which its owner valued highly and had richly annotated.

Curiously enough, just as he had decided to go to Hamburg, he was informed that if he chose he might be made Professor of Archæology at Cassel, and keeper of a cabinet of antiquities and coins. This office had, however, no attractions for him in comparison with the position to which he now looked forward, in which he hoped to find scope for his best energies, and to do noble service to his country. His determination was not, therefore, for an instant shaken.

Early in April, 1767 he left Berlin; and it so happened that he was obliged to go without saying farewell to his brother. "Everything," he wrote,[1] "that brothers have to say to each other at parting, goes without saying between us two."

He never again entered Berlin except as an occasional visitor, and his repugnance to it became stronger the longer he lived; yet his name is now indissolubly associated with it. Indeed, in its somewhat dreary annals there is no more brilliant record than the fact that the most independent and fascinating of the literary heroes of Germany spent in it many of his best years. When a man of very different temper, Heinrich Heine, full of youthful ardour, but already sarcastic, self-conscious, and not easily impressed, went to Berlin, the name of Lessing threw a certain halo even for him over its streets. "I am awestruck," he once exclaimed in the Unter den Linden,[2] "when I think that Lessing may have stood here."

[1] S. S. xii. p. 212.

[2] Strodtmann's "H. Heine's Leben und Werke," i. p. 128.

CHAPTER XIV.

HAMBURG.

THE new Hamburg theatre—the "National Theatre" it was called—was opened on the 22d of April, 1767; and on the same day appeared an announcement by Lessing setting forth the objects of the undertaking. In calm and dignified language he pleaded that it should have a fair trial, and reminded the public of the immense difficulties which would have to be overcome. "The stages are many through which a theatre in the process of being created has to pass on its way to perfection, but a degenerate theatre is of course still farther removed from this point, and I very much fear that the German theatre is more the latter than the former. Consequently everything cannot be attained at once. But what we do not see growing we find after a time full grown. The slowest person who does not let his aim out of his sight goes more rapidly than he who wanders about without an aim." He expresses no fear of the freest criticism. "Only," he continues, "let not every little criticaster hold himself for the public, and let those whose expectations are disappointed consider what their expectations were. Not every amateur is a connoisseur; not every person who feels the beauties of one piece, the right play of one actor, is able on that account to estimate the worth of all others. A man has no taste who has only a one-sided taste; but he is often all the more a partisan. True taste is universal; it appreciates beauties of every kind, but expects from none more pleasure and delight than it can give according to its nature."[1]

[1] Sämmtliche Schriften, vii. p. 4.

The prospects of the enterprise seemed very brilliant, for the troupe included several of the best actors Germany had produced. Löwen was thoroughly in earnest; and what might not be hoped from the co-operation of such a man as Lessing? Nevertheless, there were not wanting critics who prophesied speedy failure, and unfortunately their forebodings proved only too correct. Exactly a month after the opening night Lessing wrote to his brother: "There are a good many things connected with our theatre (this in confidence!) which do not please me. There is discord among the conductors, and no one knows who is cook, who waiter." The hindrances without were still more serious. The history of the undertaking was an illustration of a fact which has often since received like illustration in England: that it is impossible for a theatre which goes beyond the public taste to succeed in a commercial sense. A cultivated community will support managers who aim at great things; an untrained society ignores or jeers at efforts which it is unable to comprehend. The new National Theatre was to appeal solely to the higher faculties; hence even the ballet was excluded as unworthy of the stage. The good people of Hamburg responded by shrugging their shoulders. Consequently in a few months the company exhausted its capital; it incurred heavy debts, and made frantic attempts by lowering the original ideal to please the mob. But in vain dancers and gymnasts were engaged: the whole scheme was discredited, and in the winter of 1767 the troupe went to Hanover to make a fresh experiment. In the following spring it returned to Hamburg, but was no more successful than before. Many performances that were announced could not be held; creditors called loudly for payment; and violent jealousies broke out among the actors. Even Löwen gave up his post in disgust and sought his fortunes elsewhere. Lessing held on as long as the theatre lasted; but he soon saw that he was doomed to disappointment. On the 25th of November, 1768, the last performance was given, and the company broke up.

"What an amiable idea," wrote Lessing bitterly but truly in the concluding article of his "Dramaturgie,"[1] "to create for the Germans a national theatre, while we Germans are still not a nation! I do not speak of the political constitution, but solely of the moral character. One might almost say, the moral character of the Germans is—the resolve to have none of their own. We are still the sworn imitators of everything foreign, especially the humble admirers of the never enough admired French. Everything from beyond the Rhine is beautiful, charming, most lovely, divine; we should rather disown sight and hearing than think otherwise; we will make ourselves take coarseness for naturalness, insolence for grace, grimace for expression, a tingling of rhymes for poetry, howling for music, rather than in the smallest degree doubt the superiority which this amiable people, this first people in the world, as it is accustomed very modestly to call itself, in everything that is good, and beautiful, and sublime, and becoming, has received for its share from just Destiny."

After all, however, the failure was not so complete as it seemed at the moment. The enterprise was the first step towards a really national theatre, and it was the occasion of a splendid contribution to the intellectual culture of Germany: the "Hamburgische Dramaturgie." It was originally intended that the criticisms of which this work is composed should appear twice a week: on Tuesdays and Fridays. It would have been hard for Lessing under any circumstances to be thus regular, and the difficulty was made all the greater by the fact that after a time pirated editions of the various numbers were issued both in Hamburg and Leipzig. Lessing protested vigorously in the public prints against this roguery, and repeatedly pointed out that if his readers would not buy the original edition the work would have to be given up. His protests, however, were of no avail. After August, 1767, there was a pause in the publication, but during the absence of the

[1] S. S. vii. p. 419.

troupe it was resumed until April of the following year. No more was heard of the journal until Easter, 1769, when all the numbers Lessing had completed were given to the world in two volumes. These included articles on the pieces presented during the first fifty-two nights. He often thought of carrying on the work until it should contain a complete record of the doings of the theatre; but other duties came in the way, and the design was given up.

The disappointments connected with the theatre were by no means Lessing's only troubles in Hamburg. In 1768 he became involved in his famous dispute with Klotz; and in the meantime his association with Bode in the printing business had led to very different results from those to which he had looked forward. With much ingenuity he had devised a scheme by which everybody concerned was to make large profits and run no risks. Nicolai irritated Lessing by laughing at his fine plan; but the event proved that the experienced man of business knew best. The firm fell into difficulties; Lessing was compelled to borrow money; and in the end the partnership was dissolved, leaving heavy debts behind it as its sole memorial.

The letters belonging to this time, which nearly all give the impression of being thrown off in haste, as if the writer was discharging a somewhat irksome duty, bear marks of an anxious and troubled mind. "If it were possible to describe to you," he wrote to his father on December 21, 1767,[1] "in what confusion, cares, and labours I have been involved, how unhappy I have almost always been, how exhausted I have often found myself in body and mind, I know you would not only forgive my silence hitherto, but consider it the sole proof of filial respect and love which I have been at this time in a position to give you. When I write, it is impossible for me to write otherwise than as I think and feel at the time. You would have had the most unpleasant letter to read, and I should have been still more

[1] S. S. xii. p. 222.

discontented with my circumstances if I had been obliged to realise how much distress they had caused my parents. It was best, therefore, to let you know nothing about them: which could only be done by not writing to you." With fine tact he says nothing about his theatrical duties, although explaining fully his relation to Bode. And he is not so occupied by his own anxieties that he cannot heartily congratulate his father on the approaching celebration of his jubilee. Before closing the letter he promises to send without fail, so soon as the Elbe is navigable again, "a small supply of sugar and wine."

The difficulties of the old pastor had increased with his years; and in answer to this letter he apparently wrote urgently asking help. Lessing longed to be able to deliver him; but he could do very little. "God knows," he wrote March 20, 1768,[1] "that I could not sooner answer your last. I sink under work and cares, and of the latter not the least is that I must know my parents to be in utter perplexity, and yet not be in a position to aid them so quickly as I wish. I hope my father knows me, and that he will not believe that I am putting him off with mere excuses. It goes to my soul, dearest father, that I cannot possibly give you the desired help by Easter. But by midsummer I will devise means, come how it may."

"My heart bleeds when I think of our parents," he wrote to his brother in July of the following year.[2] "But God is my witness that I am not to blame if I do not altogether relieve them. At this moment I am poorer than any member of our whole family. For the poorest at least owes nothing; but while I want what is most needful I am often over ears in debt."

Considerable obstacles had to be overcome before "Minna von Barnhelm" could be presented on the Hamburg stage, for the city authorities required that, as the play contained references to existing political circum-

[1] S. S. xii. p. 230. [2] S. S. xii. p. 275.

stances in Prussia, the sanction of the Prussian Minister should be obtained; and this official was in no hurry to grant it. The cool reception of the work, when at last permission was given, did not tend to make life seem more tolerable. Lessing received with great calmness and some incredulity the intelligence of the unparalleled success in Berlin. "I thank you," he wrote to his brother (April 26, 1768[1]), "for your news as to the representation of 'Minna.' The principal cause of its being so often played may well be that Döbbelin possesses few or no other pieces. At least a person who has just come from Berlin assures me that the theatre was repeatedly very empty. For my part, I have no desire on that account to be again in Berlin, and very much wish that you also were out of it. I should like to have you with me again; but I am at present neither so lodged, nor in such circumstances, as to render this possible. Thank God the time will soon come again when I shall be unable to call a penny in the world my own except what I shall first win. I am unfortunate if it must happen by means of writing! Take my brotherly advice, and give up the idea of living by writing. Neither do I much approve the idea of going with young people to the university. What can in the end come of that? Try to become a secretary or to join a college. It is the only way not to starve sooner or later. For me it is too late to take another path. I do not, however, advise you to give up altogether anything to which pleasure and genius may impel you."

At Easter, in 1768, in the midst of his perplexities, Lessing visited Leipzig, where he met Nicolai and had pleasant intercourse with some of his old friends. The youthful Goethe, full of glorious life, was expanding under a thousand different influences, and already touching with a master's hand the lyre whose strains were soon to awaken the attention of all Europe. He never had another opportunity of seeing Lessing, and always regretted that he had

[1] S. S. xii. p. 232.

allowed this one to slip. "Lessing came," he afterwards explained in "Wahrheit und Dichtung," "at a time when we had I know not what in our heads: it pleased us never to approach him, even to avoid the places where he came, probably because we thought ourselves too good to stand at a distance, and could make no claim to enter into closer relations with him. This momentary silliness, which is not very rare in the case of a presumptuous and fanciful youth, brought its own punishment in the end, for I never saw this distinguished man, whom I in the highest degree value."

In the course of the same year, as it became obvious that the theatre was to be an utter failure, and that even by trade he could not hope to win his bread, Lessing appears to have felt temporarily embittered against his country. He even began a translation of "Laokoon" into French, explaining in the preface that German was not a language fitted for such discussions. His old idea of visiting Italy returned to him; and for some time he was firmly resolved to set off in the spring of 1769, probably never to come back. "What I mean to do in Rome," he wrote to Nicolai (September 28, 1768[1]), "I shall write to you from Rome. At present I can say only this, that I have at least as much to seek and to expect in Rome as in any place in Germany. Here I cannot live for 800 thalers a year; but in Rome I can do so for 300 thalers. I can take almost as much with me as will keep me for a year; if that is all—well, that would be all here too, and I am very sure that it is pleasanter and more edifying to starve and beg in Rome than in Germany." "I am still resolved," he told his brother a month later, "to undertake my journey. But you are curious as to the day when I shall start. If I go by water—by the first spring wind. You wish to know whether I shall go solely on my own account, or in association with others? To you I may say—solely on my own account. But let people say what they

[1] S. S. xii. p. 241.

will, whether they know rightly or not. It is mere curiosity, and anything but interest in my affairs."

"You have been ill, dearest friend," runs a letter to Ramler, November 6, 1768.[1] "But how can one be well in Berlin? Everything one sees there must drive gall into one's blood. Come quickly to Hamburg; we will take ship, and rove a couple of thousand miles over the world. I give you my word we shall come back healthier than we set out—or not at all, which comes to the same thing. I do not imagine that I shall be longer happy in Rome than I have yet been in any place in the world. If then the 'Collegium de propaganda fide' has to send some one to a place where not even a Jesuit will go, I will go there. If we see each other again after twenty years, what shall I not have to tell you! Remind me then of our theatre here. If I have not by that time forgotten the wretched affair, I will tell you its history minutely. You shall hear everything that cannot be written in the 'Dramaturgie.' And if we then have no stage, I shall be able to show from experience the surest way of never having one. *Transeat cum cæteris erroribus.*"

When people heard that Lessing intended to go to Rome, the first thought usually was that he was about to follow the example of Winckelmann. Nothing irritated him more than the notion that he was imitating any one whatever. Always moved by strong impulses of his own, and acting upon them whether or not they were those of other people, it seemed unaccountable to him that he should be supposed capable of meekly following in the steps even of so distinguished a man. "Do you know what annoys me?" he wrote to his friend Ebert in Brunswick.[2] "That every one to whom I say, 'I am going to Rome,' immediately thinks of Winckelmann. What have Winckelmann, and the place which Winckelmann made for himself in Italy, to do with my journey? Nobody can value the man higher than I; yet I should be as

[1] S. S. xii. p. 251.

[2] S. S. xii. p. 245.

little pleased to be Winckelmann as I often am to be Lessing!"

His independent spirit would not allow him to think even of taking letters of recommendation with him. Nicolai had written to him of various such letters which a friend of Winckelmann's was willing to place at his service, but this was his reply:[1] "I wish no acquaintances in Rome except those I shall myself make in an accidental way. If Winckelmann had not been so especial a friend and client of Albani, I believe his 'Monumenti' would have borne a very different character. Much rubbish has found a place there solely because it is in the Villa Albani: things which from the standpoint of art are of no value, and from that of scholarship not much except what Winckelmann forcibly drives into them. I can see what I wish to see, and live as I think of doing, without cardinals."

For many months he continued in the firm determination to carry out this scheme; but there were very different experiences in store for him.

Before passing on to the "Dramaturgie" it will be appropriate to quote some sentences in which Lessing alludes to certain comedies by his brother. After passing a very unfavourable judgment, he adds:[2] "I beg you not to take ill my plain speaking. If you do not hear the dry truth from me, who will say it to you? I have often already told you by word of mouth wherein I think you fail. You have too little philosophy, and work too frivolously. To make the spectators laugh so that they will not at the same time laugh at us, we must work long and earnestly in the study. A dramatist must never write what comes first into his head. Your language alone would show your haste. On every page there are grammatical mistakes, and scarce a single speech is correct, individual, and new. I must, indeed, console you by saying that your first pieces are quite as good as my first pieces, and if you devote, as I

[1] S. S. xii. p. 257. [2] S. S. xii. p. 274.

have done, to every new piece from four to six years, you may easily do something better than I have done or shall do. But if you continue to write piece after piece; if you do not in the interval exercise yourself in other work in order to arrange your thoughts and to create for your expression clearness and precision: I say decidedly that you will do nothing special in this department, and your hundredth piece will not be a hairsbreadth better than your first."

"Study more diligently," he had written in a previous letter,[1] "learn to express yourself well and justly, and cultivate your own character: without that I do not believe that any one can become a good dramatic writer."

[1] S. S. xii. p. 249.

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